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VOLUME 2

Prologue

Arasia Island was a small island on the eighth ring. One could make his or her way around it in a single day.

Though airships passed by Arasia Island's only settlement once daily, adventurers rarely visited the small village. Because of that, the islanders knew the ones who did well.

The eldest lady of the village said, "Kasumi-dono, it's been a long time. It's been a month since Sakuya-dono last came." She smiled, further wrinkling her already wrinkly face.

When lost, some adventurers would stay on this island and leave a message. They would set up a camp here for a little while.

The calendar popularly used in Sky World split up years into twelve months each, months into thirty days each, and days into twenty-four hours each.

"Sakuya-dono told me. She and the others are all doing well. They are going to the fourth island ring. As soon as she finished what she wanted to do, she wanted to let you know where she would be waiting. Anyways, that's the message she left."

After Jun's group left Altaria Island, they headed towards this island next on their airship.

"I'm happy to hear that Sakuya-chan and the others are safe. I really am." Having heard that message, Kasumi was delighted. "If Sakuya-chan contacts you again, please tell her not to worry and that even if it takes some time, I will definitely make it up to the fourth island ring with these guys."

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 1: Raid
Part 1

Sky World.

It once used to be nothing more than a free online tablet RPG.

It was a part of the so-called MMORPG genre (massively multiplayer online role-playing games). In this type of game, many players connect to a single server, experiencing the same world in real time.

Sky World once used to be nothing more than another one of those games. It was a fantasy world, with countless islands floating in the sky.

But suddenly, one day, this virtual world became reality.

The Sky World players found themselves physically in the game's universe. Nobody knew what had happened to their bodies. The rumor had it that tens of thousands of people had been sent to this world.

It was a carbon copy of the one from the game. But there was no way that the world could have purely been digital. It was far too realistic.

Just one week after Sky World went live, the Birthday occurred. Actually, 133 days have passed since then. The goal of this survival game, however, had yet to be found.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 1: Raid
Part 2

The Sky World universe consisted of countless islands, floating in the sky above a vast sea.

They came together into eight distinct rings, stacked vertically.

A little more than a month earlier, a magic swordsman named Jun met two girls on Altaria Island, which lies on the eighth ring, the one closest to the sea. The two girls were Kasumi, a light warrior, and Eri, a white magician. Having left their old guild, they sought an opportunity to escape from the secluded Altaria Island.

Kasumi's goal was to meet up with Sakuya, her close friend from whom she'd been separated. But Sakuya was likely already ages away, up on an island in the fourth ring somewhere.

She was actually an offline friend of Jun's with a nickaname Kai. Jun had first stepped into Sky World in order to look for her. As a result, helping Kasumi turned out to be the easiest way for Jun to reach his goal.

When Jun went to recover a key to an airship, the only way off the island, Sayuka suddenly showed up. She came to attack Jun in an effort to prevent him from gaining the airship, reasoning that she didn't want Kasumi involved in the brutal battles that awaited them on the upper rings.

Jun just managed to eke out a win. He had everyone board the airship, hiding the fight from Kasumi. The trio set off from the island into the vast universe of Sky World.

Three weeks had passed. The group finally landed on Lao Thai, an island on the seventh ring.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 1: The Raid
Part 3

Four great beasts lived on Lao Thai, one for each cardinal direction. They were said to have protected the island since long, long ago. They were Azure Dragon, Vermillion Bird, Black Tortoise, and White Tiger [1]. Everybody on the island revered and feared these four guardian deities borrowed from Chinese mythology.

However, adventures didn't particularly care about the story behind those creatures. They were motivated by their greed and acted accordingly. If the monsters could be killed, adventurers would hunt them down. If they had good drops, then they would become and even better target.

These people were known as gamers. At least, that's how Jun explained it. They were the ones who had come to Sky World.

However, this did not apply to everybody.

Kasumi pushed her way through the crowd to make it to Jun. "Is it okay to kill creatures whose purpose is to protect people?" She asked, frowning.

She made a doubtful face when Jun arranged a meeting with a heavy warrior. Jun smiled bitterly like her, and quickly ended his conversation with the other adventurer. He turned around and faced her.

"Even when the four great beasts are killed, they will revive in just one day. Their quick respawn time is one of their special characteristics. The developers of Sky World surely wanted them to be used to get some raid experience."

Kasumi didn't appear to be convinced, though. She felt there had to be more to it and continued frowning. It wasn't just a system. She did not think that this world was just a game.

Kasumi Yukasaki needed a completely different approach to understand this.

"Ah, so it's like that. Let me remind you of the quest for the four great beasts. The great beasts are testing adventurers' skill. They want to test adventurers' wit, resourcefulness, and communication. Finally, the Vermillion Bird tests raw power and cooperative ability. The four great beasts and the quest want to help weak and inexperienced newbies become full-fledged adventurers."

Jun looked left and right. Fifty people had gathered in front of the Vermillion Bird's cave. It was a loose group of adventurers who had answered Jun's call for assistance. People referred to such groups as adventurer militias. This particular adventurer militia was preparing to fight the Vermillion Bird, with Jun at its head.

"As the final test, the Vermillion Bird calls for someone to assemble a group in order to be defeated."

In actuality, nobody among the group of adventurers thought that. They came there just to clear the quest or for raid drops like an HP-up ring.

However, as far as Kasumi was concerned, Jun's explanation was much more important than quest rewards or rare items. Nodding seriously, she said, "Understood. Let's go get Vermillion God-san's approval," and returned to her own group.

"What a cute girl."

Turning around and staring blankly, she saw a seemingly out of place young girl, a secluded young woman in a black dress. Her knee-long blond hair swayed with the wind like stalks of rice in autumn. She looked up at Jun with her blue eyes, as if she were blaming him for something.

"Jun's girlfriend-san, this is the first time I've seen her."

"It's not like that," Jun said, as he shook his head, taking a breath while avoiding eye contact. Though adventurers in Sky World could freely edit the color of their hair, this girl said that she was born with that hair. Probably. Another thing that set her aside from other players was her gaze, which could enchant other people like a charm spell.

"Yukaria, over there."

"I'm just buffing. Is it really okay if we don't fight against the weak mobs?"

"They'll mostly have been killed by the time they get to you. The newbies need experience."

"You're pretty calm for your time leading a raid."

"That's because I'm a coward. I can have my peace of mind because I have tricks up my sleeve."

"Well then, let's see how you handle this."

Yukaria laughed mischievously and went back to the fifth group.

“Who was that just now?” Eri looked up. She had been busy exchanging information on her tablet with some other adventurers but it seemed like she had been listening the whole time. “Is she a noblewoman roleplayer?”

“Yukaria is her character’s name, but her real name is Shido Erishia-Murasaki. … She goes back and forth between Japan and America every six months. Her hair and eye colors are her natural ones.”

“Huh? A real halfie? And her age?”

“She’s the same age as me. Before I met you guys, I often grouped with her. Though since she had a fixed group of five people, sometimes I thought that I was intruding on them.”

“A fixed group… So that’s why they were all put together in the back.”

“I rely on them as damage mitigators. If, for some reason, there is a disruption somewhere, they’ll deal with it. They can take care of the potentially overwhelming amount of weak spawns.”

“Is it okay to put Kasumi in such an important position?”

This time, Kasumi Yukasaki had been given the most important role of a tank in the weak monster sweeping group. She would quickly take aggro from the relentless waves of weak monsters around the Vermillion Bird so that they would not get close to the main group. The success of the entire raid depended on that role.

The weaker monsters would usually respawn every two minutes but with a maximum of 16 each time. In response to this, Jun designated four groups to defeat them. Since one group consisted of five members, half of the team ended up being assigned to do this.

“I know that you want Kasumi to get more experience, but aren’t you moving a bit too quickly? It hasn’t even been a whole month since you guys came to this island.”

“Since her battery is now completely charged, it’s fine if she dies once. This is a good time for this.”

Under Jun’s guidance, Kasumi was absorbing all sorts of skills like a sponge. She was now an expert at being a tank and was not always shy about it anymore.

Jun thought that the time to take the next step had come. This raid would be the final test in Kasumi’s training.

“So basically, I want to complete all of the quests on this island.”

There were quests that required completing a raid to be cleared. The four sacred beasts quest was one of these.

“Is that really what you’re here for?”

“Of course it is.”

Jun shook his body. Clearing the quests. Getting 100% completion on every single island. Jun thought these were the most magnificent things ever. That they were his ultimate pleasure.

“You questmaniac…”

“Stop praising me. I’m getting embarrassed.”

“I’m not praising you! Oh whatever. I’m going to my own group.”

“Do your best! I’m counting on you as the main healer!”

“I wonder if I’m good enough. Seems like there are people better than me here,” Eri said, grunting and forcing her way through the crowd.

(She could be the main healer for any guild.)

Jun thought of her much more highly than she did of herself. She could cast heals in the weirdest of times. In this month, even though they had been all over doing quests, he had not seen her mess up a single time.

“Are you praising Eri-san?” It was a tall and thin boy. A silver medallion symbolizing his proficiency in black magic hung over his chest.

“She’s annoying. … Isao-san, how is the situation over there?”

“I was telling them not to use summoning magic to play around with fireworks. There are around twenty raid newbies. I’m splitting them into groups evenly like you said.”

“What about potions?”

“I limited the access to them for the newbies. It’s even dangerous for those who have done raids before. It’s good

that we summoned a shopkeeper in advance.”

When they were separated from the group, adventurers buying potions had to be careful. They had to keep records about nearby signs, the prices for different types of potions, and the amount that would be needed for the raid. Sometimes, adventurers would forget to buy potions, and those people would then hurry back to the shopkeepers.

“Even if you say that, the hi-potions and anti-corrosives will definitely come in handy in this battle.”

“You sure are helpful, Isao-san.”

Isao knew Lao Thai well. However, as an alchemist, he was not much of an adventurer. Since he had increased his alchemy skill level cap a couple of times and made it to level 120, it wouldn’t have been too far-fetched to call him the best alchemist in Sky World.

This time, he was taking part in the raid as the deputy leader. He and Jun were old friends.

“Don’t you remember? Even in other games, whenever it was like this and you were leading, I took care of this stuff… Even though our groups were pretty loosely formed, we ended up on par with the best guilds on the server.”

“That was a year ago.”

“No, at that time I was still working.”

“Did something happen at work?”

“The company went bankrupt. I felt like the guild I was in at that time could make it to the top, so by mistake… In the end, things settled down. It was about that time that I started playing Sky World… That’s how it was.”

Isao laughed brightly. It seemed that it was hard for him to talk about.

“Anyway, four months have passed. Even when I got other jobs, I would always get fired during the trial periods. I had to make my living as an alchemist in this world.”

“I’m counting on ya!”

“Leave it to me. It’s a request from none other than Jun-san… Have you been with Kai-san?”

“Ah… I haven’t been able to get in touch with him.”

That was a lie. Jun was taking great care to keep the communication stone that he had gotten from Kai/Sakuya’s dead body safe. However, he had been determined to not tell anybody about what happened.

“I see. If you see him, you’ll definitely tell me, right? Together, you two were an unrivaled pair.”

“Uh… It might be possible that he’s using a different name here.”

After all, names on the internet were just means of identification. Jun and Isao both registered in Sky World under the same names as before, but even if they didn’t, they could easily identify each other since they had met once before in an offline meeting. However, situations like that were rare.

“Isao-san, you’re experienced in this raid, right? Is there something we should watch out for?”

“I guess I am. The boss is stubborn, but it’s not like it’s very strong. If we just take care of the monster spawns…”

Isao casually changed the subject.

After all, preparing the raid group took only twenty minutes.

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Translator’s/Editor’s Notes:

[1] – Azure Dragon – ruler of the east, Vermillion Bird – ruler of the south, Black Tortoise – ruler of the north, and White Tiger – ruler of the west.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 1: The Raid
Part 4

The sacred beast, Vermillion Bird, had colorful feathers like a peacock, and when it spread out its wings, it spanned 10 meters from tip to tip. Though it wouldn't be able to fly in the cave, it could shoot its feathers like missiles. The feathers regenerated, and could corrode weapons and armor. Without a well thought-out plan, its attacks could be very dangerous.

However, this time, Jun had the raid members use anti-corrosives. In this situation, overly specific explanations paid off.

He got OKs from all of the group leaders to proceed. Without a moment's delay, Jun gave instructions to enter the cave.

Inside was waiting the Vermillion Bird. Once it noticed the adventurers, it began asking a question in a calm, female voice.

"Do you have the courage to take on this test?"

If the adventurers said no at this point, the Vermillion bird would disappear for ten minutes. In that time, other quests could be completed in the cave. However, these fifty well-buffed adventurers were not about to do so.

"We accept your challenge," said the heavy warrior in the front.

The Vermillion Bird's name turned red. It went into active mode.

"If that's the case, show me your strength!"

It spread its wings and the fight began.

The fifty adventurers scattered all at once. Guard monsters spawned all around the large cave. They were dressed up in colorful armor as if they had come straight out of a movie about the Three Kingdoms [1]. However, they were centaurs, a horse-man hybrid, and they were more than three meters wide.

They were called Vermillion Bird Guardians. Their high attack powers posed a serious threat to the group attacking the Vermillion Bird itself, so the support groups' ability to keep them at bay would determine the outcome of the battle.

The four weaker monster killing groups took the Vermillion Bird Guardians' aggro and pulled them towards the corner of the area. At the same time, the main group's heavy warrior clashed with the Vermillion Bird.

The main group had three white magicians, led by Eri. Their job was to make sure to heal the heavy warrior. When the heavy warrior took a enough enmity from the Vermillion Bird, the attackers began their onslaught of close- and long-range attacks, arrows flying from afar. However, the Vermillion Bird was a high level raid monster with a lot of

HP. Its health bar was only slowly going down.

As expected, it became a long and drawn out battle.

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Translator's/Editor's Notes:

[1] – A Chinese historical period around 250 AD, where three states, Wu, Shu and Wei, competed for supremacy over China. There's a Chinese TV series of the same name, also a Hong Kong movie, and the era seems to be overall a popular theme in local movie industry. An example of an armor in such a movie could be found here. The period is also marked by the emergence of armored cavalry in the area. Just google or wiki it if you want more info.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 1: The Raid
Part 5

“Jun, you’re a skillful leader, just as I expected.”

Yukaria watched the battle intently while listening to her tablet from an empty area. The group in charge of killing the weak monsters was steadily taking out Vermillion Bird Guardians. At this rate, victory would surely be theirs.

“The real battle starts when it goes into enraged mode.”

A male knight was sitting next to Yukaria. As tanks, knights differed from light warriors, another tank class, in that they did not have taunt, though they had stuns, recovery spells, and other white magician-esque magic.

“Carelessness will not be tolerated. When the boss’ HP goes below 50%, monster respawn speed will double. When that happens, how will you handle it?”

“That’s where we come in.”

A girl in a black dress slapped the knight. She was married to him, but also played a summoner, an attacking class.

“But I want the raid to be a bit more challenging. We don’t want you to want to retire.”

“This is Jun’s first time leading a raid. Let’s hope the stars are aligned in our favor and pray for success.”

“Even if you say things like that… Murakami, you still are stressed out, right?”

“Yeah… right.”

Yukari laughed ambiguously.

(Retirement, huh.)

Two of her teammates were going to retire after this raid and live a happy married life. They had said that they had been planning on opening a store in Payang. The rest of the team really should have been wishing them good luck…

“Let’s think about how Murakami feels here.”

“Yeah… sorry Murakami. Seems like you’re always the one in this position.”

The male light warrior and the female druid seemed uncomfortable.

“Please don’t think too much of it.”

Trying to stop the commotion, Yukari smiled sweetly. “You two have finally become such good friends with us, I’m

relieved. Really.”

That’s how she really felt. That happiness came from the bottom of her heart. However…

“It’s really wonderful how you guys have been so blessed by both sides.”

Their five person group had ended up being divided into two lesser ones of two people, and Yukaria ended up as the odd one out.

It couldn’t have been helped. Those boys and girls had lived together for three months. They entered relationships with each other, this was natural even if they deepened their friendships.

However, Yukaria was a bit lonely, as if she had been left to eat alone.

(I guess it can’t be helped)

She sighed inaudibly.

“We made it down to 50%,” murmured the female druid, lifting her face from her tablet.

The Vermillion Bird shrieked. Just now, the rate at which Vermillion Bird Guardians were respawning went up. As soon as the groups in charge of killing them managed to pull one of them, another appeared elsewhere.

“Does it seem like we can do it?”

“Yeah… Somehow, we will.”

The summoner closed her eyes. She let her familiar loose into the space. She was gathering information with its eyes.

“This is bad. The newbies are getting confused.”

Sensing the danger, Jun hurried on over to Yukaria’s group.

“You four, go to the inner left side. As for you, Yukaria, go hold the monsters flooding the main group back.”

“Understood. I’m not healing?”

“See Eri about that.”

“Basically, she’s the main healer then?”

“So that the Vermillion Bird will stay on the main group. I asked her to do it.”

Jun rushed off to somewhere else.

Though they were still keeping things in order, if it broke down, it would be very difficult to regroup. That was how raids worked. But they stood firmly in that critical moment.

“Well, I’m going. Murasaki, don’t overdo it.”

“Of course. Ah, tensions are rising. I’ll shoot at the Vermillion Bird Guardians.”

“… You have to do it skillfully, or else you’ll pull all of them.”

While Yukaria left the group and went towards the Vermillion Bird, she shouted “Wake Up”. Her body became covered in light and her eye-popping red dress turned into simple leather armor. She had guns in both of her hands.

Gunslinger. When in a reliable group, gunslinger could utilize its abilities extremely effectively, which made it stand out from the other classes.

(So, what will I do? After this…)

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 1: The Raid
Part 6

As Kasumi was new to normal raids, she did not initially show much promise.

Neither Jun nor Eri was by Kasumi's side now. The two friends who fought together with her were replaced by a new group, with people she had never seen before. They worked as a group for the first time today and their female druid could not match Eri's ability in healing.

Jun told her not to do anything unnecessary.

"But this is fun."

When the battle started, Kasumi would have to run around. While heavy warriors were essential for raids, light warriors differed in that they had to think fast and make decisions on a situational basis. She was supposed to do just that. That was what Jun had told her.

"Always keep track of the entire battlefield. No matter where you are, make sure to do your job. Fight with this mindset."

She thought that would be difficult. Jun always wanted her to improve herself. Sometimes, he would have her do extremely difficult tasks, but even if she had only been able to complete a third or a half of them, he would praise her.

(One day, I will be everything Jun wants me to be.)

She wanted to surprise him. She wanted for him to need her. That's what she wished for. For this reason, Kasumi overstretched herself. She kept on giving it her all.

"The sub-tank is going over to the left, Kasumi-chan, head on over to the right!"

"Got it! Should I pull some more?"

"Get them to the center! Can you keep them on you? If even the littlest thing happens…"

"I have their movement patterns memorized!"

"Huh, already? … Okay, please go ahead!"

The druid gave out the instructions as the leader of the group. Druids were a different kind of healers from white magicians. While their instant heals couldn't compare to white magicians', they had much more cost efficient regeneration over time spells, and their buffs were unrivaled. Kasumi's always-buffed status made it so that her HP and defense had never before been as high.

Moving away from her group, Kasumi led the Vermillion Bird Guardians into the center of the cave and began stalling for time. This long into the battle, she had been able to remember their attack patterns. Continuing to avoid the centaur type monsters' violent spear swings, she increased her enmity with taunts and her shortsword.

"Sorry, Kasumi-chan! Can you handle one more?"

"Sure Send it here please!"

Either way, in the grand scheme of things, the battle was taking a turn for the worse for the whole raid group. Jun had told her in advance about a plan B for use in such situations.

"Either way, whether things simply don't work out or something unpredictable happens, only sixteen Vermillion Bird Guardians can exist in the battlefield at any given time. So no matter what, if it's going down the drain, the sixteen Vermillion Bird Guardians can be parked [1] without killing them. Then everybody else can rush to the Vermillion Bird and bring it down."

It seemed that, one way or another, Jun would switch from the slower damage output caused by having two separated groups and to using the parking technique. Though controllers like bards and skullswords could frantically keep the Vermillion Bird Guardians from moving, as they were higher tiered monsters with particularly high magic resistance, they could repel magic quite well. Such monsters were not easily controlled when struggling.

Though her role did not grant her much opportunity to think about unrelated things, she noticed a girl in a dress by Jun's side. That gunslinger, Yukaria, who was now wearing leather armor and wielding guns in both of her hands, parked three Vermillion Bird Guardians all by herself with her bind, snare, and hatebuster bullets.

" Wow, the effects of gunslingers' bullets last only a short while. I know they're hard to resist, but still… she really is something."

Her teammate, a druid, sighed in wonder.

"I'm getting high on this! Haha, I'm going to splash lots of white sticky stuff all over you!" [2]

When her bullets hit the Vermillion Bird Guardians' feet, thin spiderweb-like strings would cover the point of impact and coil around them. The Vermillion Bird Guardians, unable to get themselves unstuck, would squirm desperately. These were the gunslinger's snare bullets.

"She's so good. The bullets would only do a little bit of damage if she shot directly at them. True, this way the monsters charge back in rage, but she has no problem avoiding their attacks, with such small steps nonetheless… And then more snare bullets. Brilliant."

Stuck in the spider webs, the Vermillion Bird Guardians stopped moving.

"Since they're so hot, they stick."

"…That's a bit weird."

The druid's final claim went beyond the range of normal.

"Ah, aaaah."

"But, wow, Jun-kun really trusts you."

(Someone Jun-kun trusts…)

For some reason, she felt a huge pain in her chest.

While Kasumi pulled two Vermillion Bird Guardians, she asked herself whether she could do it Biting down on her lips, she nodded firmly. She could do it. She could do it well. So…

“It’s no use, they’re still coming!”

“Over here! I can take one more!”

The puller hesitated after hearing Kasumi.

“Just a little bit more and we’ll win! We’ll hold them back!”

“Got it!”

The Vermillion Bird’s HP was down to 20%. Everybody was holding out. The raid group lifted from their earlier state of confusion.

The third Vermillion Bird Guardian was being pulled. As Kasumi took aggro with a taunt, she led it around by taking steps in a circle.

She could do it. Kasumi believed. Fully buffed, light warriors’ bodies felt as light as feathers. Even if she did not taunt those three monsters as much as she had, continuing to take aggro like this…

“Sorry.”

Turning around to see another group yelling, she saw four more Vermillion Bird Guardians. They approached the other group, which had been running around. Due to that, the Vermillion Bird Guardians kept attacking them.

Kasumi ran away from them immediately. Just avoiding an attack by a very small space, she rolled onto the hard ground. She avoided everything. Then…

As she got up, she felt the shock of the situation at hand. Up until now, the Vermillion Bird Guardians that she had on her were kicking at her. The druid who was supposed to be healing her did not know what to do. It was bad. If she healed Kasumi now, she would take aggro from all of them.

If that happened… Kasumi bit down on her lip hard and started running towards the entrance to the cave. Four Vermillion Bird Guardians followed in her path.

“Kasumi-chan, it’s no use!”

It was the druid. No, this was fine. She did it on a moment’s judgement. The Vermillion Bird’s HP only had 10% left. When a boss died, the continuously respawning monsters would also disappear.

So, if she took on four of them herself…

Kasumi tumbled around, getting hit hard on her back. The Vermillion Bird Guardians surrounded her at the entrance. Her HP started plummeting…

It became zero.

As she lost consciousness, she witnessed the Vermillion Bird fall to the cave ground with a loud roar.

Translator’s/Editor’s Notes:

[1] – Parking is a technique in which a player keeps a monster or a group of monsters stuck in one spot, something

like a stunlock.

[2] – I feel the need to emphasize this – I DO NOT have anything to do with this sentence, Thomas B. Aulis: it's what it literally said >:

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 1: The Raid
Part 7

The raid group emerged victorious.

Four dead. The weak monster killing group lost many of its members . The newbie healers had panicked, and things went downhill from there. The front lines had collapsed in a single moment. Without Kasumi's sacrifice , it would have surely gone to ruin. Everybody recognized that.

If there were more raid plans, certainly they would contact each other. They would work together again.

The Vermillion Bird raid ended in a success with those words.

In Sky World, death was not the ultimate end.

Somebody who died would lose about 40% of his or her tablet battery and then respawn at his or her bind point. When the tablet battery became completely depleted, the dead person would go somewhere . It is said that when that happens, the person does not revive. Nobody knew what would happen after that.

Fortunately, Kasumi's tablet had already been charged up to 100%. 'Complete death' would not come for another two deaths. Furthermore, each day, tablets recharge about 1%.

When Kasumi revived and the battle was over, she was scolded by Jun and Eri.

"Okay, Kasumi-san? The moment when you thought you could handle more was when you went wrong. You're a tank, not a controller. You should know that you shouldn't try to hold down more than one monster at once ."

"Basically, when you don't let your healer heal you by running away, your healer will have lots of problems. Any heals will be life threatening to your healer. It's irresponsible ."

She had nothing at all to say. Kneeling on the floor of her inn room, Kasumi apologized earnestly. Since she was cognizant of her act of arrogance and pride, she accepted the lecture without a word .

"… Nonetheless, the truth of the matter is that we won because of you. Thanks, Kasumi-san. Thanks to you, my first time leading has ended in a success."

"Right."

"But next time we do this, I'll really get angry."

"That's not unreasonable."

"Well, okay. Here, take this," Jun said as he handed over a set of gauntlets.

Gauntlets of Valor, rarity 8. If she remembered correctly, it was one of the items that the Vermillion Bird dropped. It

had high defense power and was visually appealing, but since it also had the rare effect of drastically increasing the effectiveness of taunts, it was a very in-demand item.

“The person who won it in the dice roll wanted you to have it.”

“But…”

“He said it was because you were the reason we won . Take it.”

“Giving this to me… isn’t it a very valuable item?”

“Shouldn’t you try to become a very valuable tank?”

“Really, huh. Don’t I have to be stronger?”

She looked at Jun and Eri. The two of them smiled.

The unpleasant feeling in her heart dispersed .

She was happy. Just seeing Jun and Eri’s smiling faces made her happy. They were the best teammates. If she stayed with them, she felt like she could do anything.

“Kasumiii, what are you smiling for?”

“I’m not.”

“No, you are. Honestly though, you were in the wrong.”

“I guess…”

“…well it’s not like the world is ending.”

Eri laughed wryly. It seemed like she was teasing Kasumi. The room became enveloped in laughter.

If things remained like this forever, she would have been okay with it. Kasumi thought that from the bottom of her heart.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 1: The Raid
Part 8

The island of Lao Thai followed a Chinese theme. However, that did not mean that it was an exact copy of China. It only had a very strong Chinese vibe.

The city of Payang lay on the southern tip of the island.

Countless tower-like buildings filled the large city. With a population of fifty thousand, this was a place for the over three thousand adventurers who had lost their way in Sky World. Many airships were anchored at the airport, and trade with other islands flourished. People, goods, and information were exchanged for money. Many more adventurers came to this island for this convenience.

Jun heard from Alice that there were about sixty thousand players roaming Sky World. About five percent of those players came together in Payang.

It was a bustling city. Many people were moving down the streets at all times. Many establishments, not just shops for ordinary people, serviced adventurers around here. Only on this island was an auction system established..

Furthermore, the presence of so many people meant that trouble could also sprout up more easily…

“Hey, wait! Don’t be violent!”

Jun heard that as he entered a hidden alleyway. It came from a shop nearby. “Second-Hand Store” was written on the quaint little stone building’s front sign.

The term/concept of the “second-hand shop” was said to have been first used by Yuuji Horii, developer of the famous RPG, Dragon Quest. Considering that those shops traded in all sorts of items, not restricted to just weapons or armor, and that anybody would instantly recognize the name of that game, the store became fairly well known.

In other words, it was a shop selling miscellaneous items that served people who knew of Dragon Quest, namely all the adventurers who went in.

“Trouble in that store?” Jun thought to himself as he tilted his head. “The shopkeeper was…”

Jun opened the door. Stuff had been scattered all over the place. A big man twisted a short young girl’s arm from across the counter. Though the young girl struggled violently, she would not let go of the bag in her left hand.

“I told you to give that to me! I said I would pay as much as you wanted!”

“No! This is for other customers! Please leave already!”

The two of them, franticly struggling with each other, did not notice Jun’s entry. That came in handy, as Jun could quietly observe the situation. When he squinted, he could see their character names floatingabove their heads. The

girl's name was… Ryuka. Even if Jun had not met her before, he would have known that she was one of the owners of the store. The other, pushy guy was…

Zakka. His guild was called the Illusionary Brigade. It was a large guild of over fifty members. Even though they were known as diehards who were willing to PK, causing such a racket in the center of town…

"Hey, stop it."

The man turned around, still holding Ryuka's arm.

"Stay out of this!. Shut up."

"I'll call the guards."

Ordinary people in Sky World were no match for those kinds of people who wouldn't easily give in. However, when such adventurers acted violently in town, the city government would deal with them by force.

In most games, it was forbidden for towns to become battlefields. In some of them, whenever somebody acted violently, strong guards would come and defeat the perpetrator.

In Sky World, Knight Golems, took on this role as city guards. As soon as they catch wind of a disallowed act being committed in the middle of the street, they would rush in and subjugate those involved.

This man would have been killed by the Knight Golems. He let go of the girl, and then, with a stern look from Jun, left the store.

Jun peeked his head out the door and waited until Zakka disappeared into the crowd of people out in the main street. Afterwards, he sighed and closed the door.

"Ah, thank you. You have my gratitude, Jun."

Ryuka got up and brushed the dust off of her skirt.

"What happened?"

"He came in saying that he would buy me out… that he would buy everything in the store. When I said that I couldn't do it in anticipation of other customers, he responded with violence…"

As if she was remembering what had happened, the short girl shivered. She was scared. Such violent situations were bound to make her feel that way.

"I'm an elementary schooler, so I guess he might have just been teasing me."

"Does that have anything to do with it? That guy was vicious."

Instructional tablets were given out to a few elementary school students as well. Consequentially, there were a few of them who ended up in Sky World.

Ryuka's situation was complicated. Her younger brother wanted to play some games, and so he installed Sky World on her tablet.

"It's my fault for having given my password to my little brother," Ryuka said, as she smiled bitterly. "Well, my little brother was the one who was playing games, but the one who came to this world was me. I'm actually a bit happy about that. He's still only four years old. If he was the one thrown into this world, surely he would have no idea what to do."

Ryuka was her brother's name, and was reserved for boys. It was probably used somewhere in Dragon Quest.

Her real name was Momoko Tamashiro. She didn't enjoy this world and wanted to return home soon. She told Jun she had spent her first week in here crying and hoping for just that.

Though many people had wanted to install Sky World, that same feeling was probably widespread. Even now, there were many players in the city who would confine themselves inside. Sometimes, they fought monsters just outside the city, just to earn enough money to survive. Their ability to adventure was comparable to that of any ordinary person. They had lived their lives in comfort, indulging themselves in whatever they could possibly want.

If somebody made it to Aion on the first island ring, these days trapped here would end.

Believing in that, they would hide themselves until the storm would come to end. Jun thought that in their case, that was probably the one best choice. They had been dragged to this world against their will. It was not fair to expect them to be as active as Jun, who had come to this world voluntarily.

On the other hand, some of them got back on their feet. Being a shopkeeper was a childhood dream of Ryuka's. In this world, she felt she could realize her dreams.

Though she seemed like she actually wanted to set up a fancy toy store, keeping in mind the principle of supply and demand, she settled on selling general goods.

"That reminds me… Where's Genta-san?"

If Ryuka were to have attempted to set up the store herself, it would have been far too difficult. She and Genta jointly owned the shop. She had said that Genta had been her class' homeroom teacher. Coincidentally, they were reunited in this world, but…

"Sensei is in charge of stock. Isao-san bought out all of our hi-potions and anti-corrosives. Yesterday, there was a big raid going on…"

"Ah, so the people in my raid were the ones who bought it."

"It was your raid?"

Sitting down on a chair that she gave him and drinking the tea she brewed herself, Jun told her all about yesterday's raid. That there were fifty members all together, and that the raid nearly collapsed. He also did not neglect to mention the fact that Kasumi saved them all.

"The first time I came here, I was still just a newbie." Furthermore, Kasumi was a second year high school student like Jun, while Ryuka was a sixth year elementary school student. "I've come out well."

Leaning on the shelf across from Jun, Ryuka looked into the distance. Having now settled down, she acted more dignified than Genta, who was prone to carelessness. She resembled her grandmother, probably because she raised her.

"… I bet you think I've taken after my grandmother now, right."

"I get what you mean."

"Jun, you still can't handle ladies." She inflated her cheeks. She pouted in a way that only someone her age could. "Speaking of which, what are you here for today?"

"Oh, I wanted to get rid of some stuff. Maybe I'll find a good buy or two along the way."

“Thanks for being a regular here, but we won’t spend too much on stuff from this island.”

“That’s how it is everywhere. It’s annoying to bring something to another island. Though you’ve amassed a lot of stuff, don’t make concessions for me. It’s terrible to seem pushy towards an acquaintance.”

“If you say that, I’ll price things without reservation.”

Ryuka took out her tablet and gestured with her left hand. She showed Jun her item window.

“How are these?”

Ryuka used a custom skin for her item window. Prices were displayed next to their corresponding items. It was a perfect skin for a merchant.

She, like other players in Sky World, had an unlimited capacity bag. All of the items in the store were in there.

Sure enough, this time, the items that Ryuka showed Jun were of all different types. Though there weren’t any super good items that amazed him, the skin was very easy to use and convenient. He ended up wanting some things.

Unexpectedly, he noticed words above the item list saying, “For the thickheaded magic swordsman who knows nothing about girls”.

“Hey, what’s that?”

“Oh, excuse me. I forgot to replace that. It should say, ‘Jun’.”

“You did that on purpose… hey, could it be that you made a list for each of your regulars?”

“Not all of them. But I do for some of the most frequent ones. It’s important to keep track of peculiarities of certain people.”

Only this shopkeeper would go to this much trouble.

“If you’d like, I can show you the list I usually show first-time customers.”

“That’s fine. You’re great at doing business.”

“It’s thanks to you that I’m doing so well.” She smiled sweetly.

(With all the things she takes into account, she can’t possibly be an elementary school student.)

Though he thought that Genta could have suggested this…

“Sensei is bad at doing business. It was worrisome.”

She sighed while talking badly about her homeroom teacher. Jun threw out his previous idea as soon as he heard that.

“Anyway, this accessory has all resistances except fire. I have fire. I’d be happy if you had an anti-poison or anti-paralysis ring. Also… do you have any healing items without a use limit?”

“If you want that, I’ll make it half the price. But Jun, you should already have an unlimited healing wand.”

“I was thinking I’d give it to Kasumi-san.”

“As a present, huh? I wonder if she’s cute. Shall I wrap it up for you? You’ll need a ribbon.”

“Please no unnecessary assumptions.”

“Oh, sounds like you’re going out with her. Though I don’t know whether you’re suitable for her.”

She tilted her head curiously.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 1: The Raid
Part 9

Jun actually understood Kasumi pretty well.

He thought that there was no point overthinking that girl's actions. Over the past month, the three of them travelled throughout the island of Lao Thai. They experienced many exciting things. He figured Kasumi Yukasaki and Eri Inui appreciated the city a lot.

In spite of that, the person stuck in Jun's mind was…

"Kai. What are you thinking about?"

These things went through Jun's head as he made his way through the congested main road after leaving the second-hand shop.

Kai took Kasumi Yukasaki for an impediment, but Jun did not agree.

When faced with an enemy, Kasumi would do everything she could to succeed. Moreover, she herself wanted to catch up to Sakuya.

However, he didn't know whether it was really okay to bring her up to the fourth ring.

Over the course of this month, he had trained her to become a full-fledged adventurer. But what about her heart? Sakuya said that she was sure that she would not be able to take on the battles that would come. What could Jun do?

What would be waiting at the absolute end of Sky World?

"Seeing the end of the blue sky, huh."

He still couldn't figure out what Alice meant by that.

The sun had begun to set. It was time to go back to his room…

"Oh, it's Jun," someone spoke up from the corner of the street.

He turned around to find Yukaria standing next to him. Her face was flushed and her breath smelled like alcohol. Hiiiiiiiii, Jun, it looks like there are four of you!"

"You're drunk."

"I'm drunk?"

Jun had a lot he wanted to say, like how it was still daytime and that she was still a minor… but before he could

scold her, she grabbed his shoulder.

“I’ve got you!”

“Calm down.”

“Hey, come with me.”

“Where?”

“The bar!”

Yukaria raised her fist. It didn’t seem like he could escape. Jun sighed.

Later that night, Jun returned to the inn with a very drunk Yukaria on his back. Though it was the middle of the night, the main street of Payan was brightly lit with magic streetlights, where bards were singing. Payan didn’t sleep.

When Kasumi and Eri saw Jun carry the drunken Yukaria into his room, they cringed.

“Ack! It reeks of alcohol!”

“Jun-san, did you go drinking?”

“I’m sober. This one here drank so much that she’s out cold.”

After Jun laid Yukaria to bed and put down her heavy stuff, he sighed.

“Hey, Jun-san, what do you plan on doing to that drunkard?” asked, Eri as she raised her eyebrows and glared at him.

“If I were going to do something to her, I wouldn’t have brought her here.”

“So what’s up then?”

“When I found her, she was already drunk…”

Jun glanced down at Yukaria on the bed. Listening to her grumbles, he figured out her situation. He didn’t know whether it would be good or bad of him to tell the others himself.

“Congratulations… congratulations…” Yukaria murmured as tears poured like raindrops down her face. “I’m not sad at all. I’m not…”

“How did this happen? It’s about someone from the group during the raid yesterday… right? They got along pretty well.”

“That group broke up. It’s complicated, but I suppose you want to know about it, right?”

“In three phrases.”

“Marriage, retirement, four people split into two groups.”

“Ooookay, okay. I understand. I get it.” Eri sighed, and uttered, “This kind of thing is quite normal.”

“Well, that’s why she went drinking. She would have gone either way, so it couldn’t have been helped. I’ll cut her some slack for today.”

Jun quickly explained the situation to Kasumi, who was standing there with her head tilted in confusion.

That Yukaria's four group members, two couples, were going to get married at the same time. That they had already stopped going on adventures. That basically, with their retirement, the group would disband. That Yukaria ended up being left on her own.

"It still makes sense to congratulate them."

"Which makes it all the worse. Normally, one would definitely be very happy for them. However, for her, that must have felt terrible. … That's how it is for a close group to break up."

"If it were just a group in a game, it would have been okay. But for us now, this is reality."

"She already had to part with her close friends and coworkers. Jun-san and Eri-chan, if you two were to get married…" As she said that, Kasumi looked at Jun and then at Eri, and started bawling.

"Ughh, what am I going to do?" She ended up imagining it vividly.

"Hey, Kasumi, don't cry! Just don't! I would never marry something like that!"

"Don't point fingers. And don't call people 'something'."

"Whaaat?"

Yukaria was half awake, rubbing her eyes. As her eyes focused, she looked at Jun.

"Hey, are you okay?"

She bent forward, off of the bed, and grabbed Jun, who had moved closer to her.

"Agh!"

"Juuuuuun, marry meeeeeeee!"

"Ahhhhh, whaaaaaaaaaaat are you doing!?" Kasumi screamed with her hands on her cheeks.

"Juuuuuuuun… You smell goooooooood…. Let's do it……."

Jun stayed still. In addition to his lack of experience with drinking alcohol, he did not have much experience dealing with women, as seen by his title back at the shop. His heart throbbed, and he blushed. Extremely confused, words couldn't come out of his mouth. She pushed her big soft breasts onto Jun's chest.

"Juuuuuuuuuuuuuun, I…"

"Ah, ah, uh…"

Jun gulped. He felt as if that gulp was so loud that it echoed through the large room. By the time he was able to get back to normal, Kasumi's face was completely pale and she had been swinging her arms around. Standing still, Eri had her hand on her mouth. Her cheeks were also red.

"Y-y-you guys, calm down."

"You calm down," Eri said, as she lightly slapped Jun on his forehead. Coming to his senses, he pushed Yukaria away from him.

"You're such a coward…"

He remembered that in times like this, she would need something to grab onto or else she wouldn't sleep. He gave

her a pillow and she hugged it tightly. After she lay down, she began snoring.

Jun took a huge breath and looked towards Kasumi.

“The alcohol is just making her babble away nonsensically.”

“Got… it. Doesn’t… matter… to me.”

She didn’t seem like she didn’t mind it, as a huge tear formed in the corner of her eye. She bit down on her lips hard. However, pointing that out would have made the situation worse.

“Hey, Jun. So where are you going to sleep today?”

Eri puffed out her cheeks and glared at Jun.

“Ah, okay. I’ll get another room. Don’t worry about it.”

After glancing one more time at Yukaria, who was still saying “Juuuuun” in her sleep, he left the room with the two girls glaring at him.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 1: The Raid
Part 10

Morning the next day. Jun and the gang had been eating breakfast on the first floor of the inn when Yukaria, with her hand on her temple, came down.

“Owwwwwwwwww, my head hurts….”

Yukaria looked over to see them staring at her silently. “What’s wrong?” She said, as if she didn’t know why she was greeted with such chilling vibes.

Eri met Jun’s gaze and she smiled bitterly back at him. Seeing the situation, Jun shrugged lightly.

“Uh… yesterday, did.. something happen to me?”

“Since you got drunk, don’t you think *you* are guilty of something?”

“…I’m so sorry.”

All of the color disappeared from Yukaria’s cheeks, leaving her ghastly pale, as she curled up into a ball , squatting on the floor. Her headache and nausea suddenly spiked in intensity.

“Ughhhhhh…”

“Okay, Yukaria, sit over there.”

“Ah, okay. …Don’t mind if I do. Let’s eat!”

This was an appetite brought upon by a hangover. Yukaria heartily swallowed up more food than two normal people could. She especially loved the meats. Though she had an air of refinement to her actions, she devoured all kinds of them, from ham all the way to bacon. She even had a whole fatty steak. The thought of doing that at breakfast made Jun’s stomach uncomfortable.

“Even though you have European blood, that really is amazing,” Eri muttered, with awe in her face.

“Thanks for the meal. It surprised me that this inn would have such magnificent food.”

“Thank you very much for your compliments. I made it.”

“Kasumi, you did? You’re wonderful. I utterly respect you.”

Yukaria stood up and bowed her head towards Kasumi. The effects of the hangover chimed in again, and she groaned, in pain as she pressed her hands onto her forehead.

“What an interesting person,” said Kasumi, smiling. “Yukaria-san, are you always like this?”

“She always feels like this. She was the youngest in the group, so she’s used to being spoiled.”

“Jun, that was impolite. …Well, it’s true that I was the one who didn’t fall in love. …So when everybody else got married, I…” Taking her seat, she sunk into her thoughts.

“…Huh?” Dropping his shoulders, Jun breathed a giant sigh. Eri glared at him.

“Jun, that wasn’t nice.”

“I don’t think I did anything wrong.”

“Jun, you make girls cry. What a cruel person.”

“You too are quite cruel. You’re not here just to lash out at me! Hey… Kasumi-san, Eri, what do you think?”

“I… think it’s okay.”

“As the healer, I’m in favor. As a gunslinger, she’s quite reliable. But for now, can we hear Yukaria’s opinion?”

“Ah, is that so?” said Jun, as he turned around to face Yukaria, who still had her hand on her forehead. “Yukaria, wanna join our group?”

The three of them all looked at Yukaria together. Noticing their glances, she lifted her head. After a little while, she turned to Jun, who had his finger near his mouth.

“Uh, well, I’m really happy that you asked me that.”

“I’m not saying this out of pity. As you see, we currently do not have a controller. If you join us, our party will become much stronger.”

“I know, but…”

“Uh… if you’re not satisfied with us, don’t hesitate to say it,” Kasumi said.

“That’s not it. Look here…” said Yukaria, shaking her head hastily.

“Sorry, what are you saying?” Facing the water given to her by Yukaria, Eri tilted her head doubtfully.

“Well, I’m a young maiden, of course, so I shouldn’t decide carelessly. I’m a shy maiden girl, but I would be lonely being left out from the harem group of you two. Just as I thought, I should present my body to Jun here…”

“W-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat are you saying?!” Eri’s face turned red, as if she were a lobster, and she shook her head furiously. She looked at Jun. “Y-y-y-y-you and this guy…”

“Calm down.”

Though he too was disturbed, Jun tried to calm Eri down. Yukaria wanted him to panic. He understood this quickly. However, that only added to Eri’s unrest.

“H-h-hey, calm down!” He looked at Yukaria and raised his fist in the air. “P-please wait! Yukaria-san is just trying to create a misunderstanding…”

“Then undo that misunderstanding!”

“Is it really just a misunderstanding?” said Yukaria, who was tilting her head with her index finger on her mouth.

“It is! Eri-chan and I aren’t like that!” Kasumi, now pale, shook her head fervently.

“Well. So that means you still haven’t…”

“N-n-n-n-noooooooo! We absolutely positively haven’t!” Eri shrieked.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 1: The Raid
Part 11

A few minutes later, when everybody settled down and reseated themselves, they drank some tea brewed for them by the shopkeeper.

“Hey, Jun. Did you really make a pass at her?” Yukaria pretended to be surprised yet again.

“You were there, so you should know.”

“I’m just trying to make sure.”

“Sheesh. How should I interpret your actions?”

“Shall we go over it in detail?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“You’re really a good-for-nothing shy kiddo.”

Yukaria seemed happy to tease him. Jun smiled wryly in response.

“That’s how you are. You two should realize the misunderstanding and change your mindset now.”

“Ugh, I’ve been ridiculed in such a way… this is truly a failure of a lifetime.” Eri, while shaking her head, collapsed onto the table. “Well, we were deceived because we didn’t know much about her personality yet. By nature, I’m a monk type! Fine, please continue!”

“Well, well, someone’s a sore loser.”

“Shut up, you idioooot! Dammit! Daaamn it!!!” Soaking the table with her tears, Eri drew circles with her finger. “Ughh, I know that you’re not the bad one here, and I’m okay!”

“Uh, uhh, I think it’s fine too.” For some reason, Kasumi’s face turned bright red as she fidgeted restlessly.

“Well… so that means you’re suitable for our team.”

“How optimistic. …But that’s besides the point.” Putting on a serious look, she looked at the three of them one by one. “This is a serious answer, but for the time being, why don’t we think of me as a provisional member.”

“Then we’ll have a test. Is that okay? I, as the healer, really want you to join us.” With those words, Eri lifted her face, and stared at Yukaria’s chest. “I also want those boobs of yours.”

“Eri’s still just a middle schooler. So, how about after this?”

“By the way, Yukaria-san, how was middle school?”

”Recently, I haven’t thought much about the years past.”

Eri dropped her shoulders disappointedly while Yukaria avoided her gaze. “Well, aren’t those boobs lovely…”

“I’m a girl going through puberty. You know, Jun really loves boobs.”

“Hey, Yukaria! That’s enough…”

“Gee, Jun, you did before.”

“Just as I thought, you should be kicked out.”

“…What a comeback.”

Jun looked over at Kasumi and then at Yukaria with an annoyed expression on his face.

“Putting that aside, this is what we’re going to do. …Yukaria, let’s all get along from now on.”

“Same for you. Though I don’t like being a controller in rough, unorganized groups, gunslingers really can’t do anything on their own.”

“What do you mean by that?” Kasumi tilted her head.

“Controllers are just like that. They are only effective in groups…”

“Hold up. I haven’t really explained the concept of controllers to Kasumi.”

“Then shall I do the honors?” Yukaria offered her hand.

“Yes, please do!”

“For starters, there are fifteen classes in Sky World, which are separated into five different roles, one of which being the attacker. There are front line and rear line attackers, with three classes in each category. Kasumi, can you tell me the other roles?”

“Yes. Tank, healer, and also, controller, right?”

“Right. You, a light warrior, are a tank. Eri, a white magician, is a healer, and Jun, a magic swordsman, is a front line attacker. Gunslinger, my class, is a controller. Though there are also three classes that are controllers, gunslingers can deal a bit more damage than the others. Though it’s not as much as Jun can do, they can deal more damage than you, Kasumi.”

Having given that brief introduction, Yukaria proceeded to talk about the main topic of this discourse.

“So, just like how tanks protect their teammates, healers heal the wounded and attackers devote themselves to killing enemies, controllers control enemies. They are most useful when there are many enemies approaching at once.”

“Many… so like during that raid two days ago?”

“Yes, in those situations it’s even normal for individual groups to take on three or four monsters at a time. When that happens, what do we do?”

“When it gets troublesome, I’ll just take care of it myself.”

“Well, that’s Jun we’re talking about.”

If Jun were alone, he would know all about the enemies’ attack patterns, so he would be able to precisely avoid their attacks all the while attacking them back. In a group, when enmity is involved, it would be much more difficult to hold on to the enemies.

“If I can’t handle it, then we won’t be able to do it.”

“What a doting father…” groaned Yukaria, her hand on her forehead in annoyance.

“If you die, Jun, then we can’t do anything. It takes ten days for the battery to recharge. It’s a long time. The day before yesterday, Kasumi-san already died, so I was thinking we should take extra care for a while,” Eri chimed in.

“…If that’s what you mean, then with my addition to the group, the way you’ve been handling battles will change completely.”

“Yukaria-san, during that raid, you held down so many monsters at the same time,” Kasumi said.

Opening her eyes, Yukaria responded, “How very observant of you.”

“Uh, well, but you were shouting some pretty weird stuff while fighting…”

“When I get excited, I unconsciously blurt out obscene things.”

“That’s a letdown for a beautiful person like you… How did you let that happen to yourself?” Eri put her hand on her forehead, disappointed. “Even so, you’re so much better than at first glance… The bard guy next to me was really amazed.”

“Like then, for example, when four monsters came our way, I stopped three of them so that the others in the group would only need to deal with one enemy at a time, though that’s just our job as controllers. Knowing the proper situations to use sleep bullet, bind bullet, and snare bullet just shows the difference in our skill levels. Though we can’t heal or buff like bards and we don’t have the defense of skullswords.”

Jun followed up on her final comment, “For what it’s worth, gunslingers have regular and special bullets that can deal damage. They won’t let even a single enemy attack.”

Practically speaking, there were many newbies who chose to be gunslingers just because they wanted to be gun-users with lots of damage.

“Uh. Though I would say that when soloing, it’s hard to do much with just special effect bullets.”

Gunslingers used two types of guns, handguns and assault rifles, both of which had the problem of reloading. Though Yukaria usually used two guns at once, each able to hold up to six bullets, she sacrificed a lot of damage in order to use bullets that inflict abnormal effects.

In groups, just doing what her role entailed was enough.

“When soloing, moving around efficiently is essential, but since gunslingers don’t have utility spells like the magic swordsman’s Long Walk, it’s really hard for us. …Anyways, any questions?”

Eri raised her hand.

“Please explain, in detail, Jun’s love for big boobs.”

Kasumi leaned forward. Jun greeted the desk with his face.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 1: The Raid
Part 12

Just that day, they decided to test the casual link they made. It would take place in the large bamboo forest north of the city, commonly known as the Panda Forest.

“This will be a quest to test our group. Let’s have at it!”

Following Jun’s lead, the party headed towards the bamboo forest. Yukaria still unable to keep balanced due to her hangover, was almost fully reinvigorated by the trees once they left the town.
Watching out for any potential ambushes from behind, they walked in file. Jun in the lead, then Yukaria, Eri, and Kasumi in the back.

“Ooh, since you were walking this much, your headache should have come back. We’ve already forgiven your drunkenness today.”

“This should go without saying, but today, no more drinking.” Jun turned around and glared at Yukaria. She puffed out her cheeks.

“Please don’t say things that make you sound like a teacher. In this world, the average mature person is fourteen, so we should consider that the age of adulthood now. Therefore, even Eri, the youngest among us, should be able to drink alcohol.”

“Hey, Eri?” called Kasumi from the back of the line. Jun strained a smile, thinking that of all people, Kasumi would be the one most opposed to drinking. “Then drink in moderation.”

“Huh, Kasumi?” Eri, startled, turned around, thinking that Yukaria would get scolded strictly like how Jun would.

“Ah, my family house is very old. On New Year’s, when everybody comes together, we drink a lot…”

“Oh, so it’s just like in the countryside. Could it be that you’re actually quite tolerant to alcohol?”

“Kind of. Just as much as I need for socializing.”

“You’re definitely super tolerant.” Seeing Kasumi tilt her head in confusion, Yukaria whispered into Jun’s ears, “If you’re thinking of getting her drunk to try and take advantage of her, she’ll beat you at your own game.”

“I would think no such thing!”

Due to her condition, Yukaria took short rests between following Jun.

Small abandoned huts stood all over the bamboo forest. It seemed like they were made as dwellings for mountain men, so monsters should never enter them. They also served as bind points. Usually, the fireplaces inside were burning, and the huts were always tidy, almost as if time had stopped.

As the four of them entered one of the huts and sat down near a fireplace, they relaxed cozily, munching on the scones Kasumi had made earlier.

“Yukaria, have you heard about the mountain men NPCs livingin the bamboo forest?”

“My group wasn’t really into doing quests… though I did hear something about it from one of my acquaintances, like that the mountain men always remain silent and that they could not take part in any kind of conversation.”

“So, the quest trigger didn’t really interest you?”

“Maybe so, or maybe it hadn’t been implemented yet. Though, in any case, back when this was just an MMO, and from the Birthday up until now, was this even here?”

“They really can’t speak?” Kasumi tilted her head. “But, uh… so, what kind of people are they?”

“I know! Their hearts only beat once per year!”, Eri jumped in.

“What kind of a mystic sage are you?”

“At any rate, monsters don’t come here. And yet we went to all this trouble for Yukaria to be here.”

“Well, most people seem to stop and turn back when they reach here. It would be quite disadvantageous to fight large scale monsters here, but I think we’ll do great.”

“We can’t afford to be negligent.”

Both Yukaria and Eri were wary of Jun’s optimistic view.

“Well, Killer Pandas work in groups. So, Jun, isn’t that why we’ve come?”

Jun shrugged lightly. He couldn’t gamble on something that dangerous without a high chance of success. This bamboo forest was home to monsters known as Killer Pandas.

“Pandas are cuuuuutee. Though I’ve never seen any in zoos before,” Kasumi said, in a carefree manner. “Giant Pandas are similar to bears. They’re omnivores. They could even eat people in certain circumstances.”

“So, they eat meat? Aren’t they supposed to eat bamboo…?”

“I’m not too knowledgeable about it, but if I remember correctly, the ones that eat bamboo only eat it because they live in a place where they can only get bamboo. I’m sure they’re omnivores. Killer Pandas are very much monsters. Though they’re not related to normal pandas, it’s not weird.”

In the world, which came to be known as Sky World, monsters did not need to reproduce in order to increase in number. Wherever mana, the origin of everything, was plentiful in an area, monsters could spawn freely.

“If a player has an attack level of 110, its name would appear white, whereas if that player had an attack level of 115, it would appear blue. That’s is definitely a quest boss.”

In Sky World, the strength of an enemy can be ascertained with special magic search spells or special items. Though doing so has since become the norm, it still depended on the character’s attack skill level. Normally, the attack skill is capped at level 100, but with a quest, the cap can be raised. People recently began talking about a fourth skill cap raising quest, which would move it to 120.

Right now, Jun and Yukaria’s attack levels were 115, while Kasumi and Eri’s were 110. Its name being white with a level of 110 means that it is an equal match for them. If the enemy were stronger, then it would be yellow, red, or

purple, in order of increasing difficulty. On the contrary, if the enemy were weaker, then its name would be blue, or if it were considerably weaker, then it would be green.

When front line attackers fought amongst each other, normally, if they were white-named for each other, it would prove to be a very close battle. It would take about three people to take out one yellow-name and a whole group of six to take out a single red-name.

Of course, there were exceptions to the prevailing view. The difficulty would change depending on the tactics used. So therefore, many only used the colors as approximate guides, as combat power and efficacy was much more dependent on weapon skills, defense skills, and equipment.

“If we were to compare it with monsters of the same type, Killer Pandas have higher than average attack power and agility. To that extent, their health is comparably low… So, since they work together in groups of four or more, how well we can hold them off will determine the course of the battle,” said Yukaria, who was the only one with experience in the bamboo forest. “Though us five of my previous group once challenged this area, we could only win against up to six of them at once. I can make four of them go to sleep… and afterwards, the front line took one monster apiece.”

“Yukaria, how was your group organized?”

“The others were a knight, a light warrior, a summoner, and a druid. It was a setup with high recovery power.”

They had a druid, a buff-focused healing role, and a knight, a tank that gets enmity with stun and healing magic. Summoners are back line attackers, but they can summon monsters based on the situation, some of which can heal.

In short, they were made up of two tanks, one attacker, one healer, and one controller, Yukaria.

“Wow, what a sturdy group…”

“Against strong monsters, damage was sluggish. Though, when Jun helped us out, we were able to make it through dungeons on the fifth ring…”

“Where did you usually adventure?”

“Recently, we’ve been playing around on the sixth ring. There are lots of beautiful views. Since we operated there, maybe that’s how the two couples sprouted up.” Remembering how she was the one left behind, Yukaria dropped her shoulders and sighed. “Marriage… I too…”

“Ugh.” For some reason, Kasumi looked at Jun, half tear-eyed.

“Why me…”

“Jun, shall we get married?” Yukaria fixed her eyes on him.

“Hey, hey…”

“Wa, waaa, waaaaaaa!”

Kasumi’s face flushed as she became flustered. Seeing this development, Yukaria pushed her face closer to Jun. As she neared him, her cleavage opened up. Jun hastily turned his eyes away.

“Jun, what do you think of me?”

“You reek of alcohol. Don’t get any closer.”

“Don’t be so shy.” She smiled, raising her index finger to her mouth. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll stop there. Okay?”

Eri forced her way through. She sighed loudly, putting her hand on the somewhat disappointed Yukaria’s shoulder.

“Flirting within the group is seriously forbidden! Yukaria, you should know!”

“I am so sincerely sorry. I was just merely poking fun.”

“So, don’t do any more teasing.”

“‘Kay mom!”

“Don’t call me that…”

Eri, the youngest of the group, dropped her shoulders in disappointment.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 1: The Raid
Part 13

Since they entered the bamboo forest, they had a two hour period of doubled moving speed due to the magic spell known as Running. Right after the third resting period, they encountered a group of Killer Pandas.

Jun's party had been making their way up a hill. The six Killer Pandas suddenly appeared as they reached the top.

"Count: Six!"

They rushed out all at once at Jun, each more than six meters tall.

"Stick to the plan!"

Jun dashed down the hill, almost rolling.

In Sky World, if the enmity of the so called KOS (Kill On Sight, meaning attacking as soon as one enters its field of vision) monsters is not controlled, they can kill whoever they end up targeting in the beginning.

The reason Jun was in the front was not just that he was good at being alert of his surroundings, but also because he excelled at the art of luring monsters.

The six Killer Pandas chased after Jun in a line.

"Well then, die!" exclaimed the excited Yukaria.

She shot at them repeatedly with her two handguns, which slipped out smoothly from her holsters. The two Killer Pandas in the back took the hits in their stomachs and stopped moving. She used sleep bullets. They were very effective against animal-type monsters.

"Wow! Amazing!"

Eri raised her voice in admiration reflexively. With her two guns, she aimed at different targets with each hand, moving in ways that were not originally possible in Sky World. Eri understood that she had mastered that technique on her own.

"Controller classes are very much targeted towards FPS gamers, though…"

"I love things like FPS'!"

The sleep bullets that she had just shot could stop monsters flat in their tracks, almost as if they were put to sleep, for twenty seconds. It wasn't actually putting them to sleep, but the effect was kind of like hypnosis. Because of that, even if someone disturbed the affected monsters with only a small tap, they would jump up and rush out attacking the gunslinger who shot the sleep bullets.

Though, without this kind of paralysis, the other group members would have to deal with multiple enemies at once. However sturdy the tank was, it would be difficult to hold up enmity for multiple monsters. So then, the enmity from healing would exceed the enmity gained by the tank, and all of the monsters would attack the healer. Most of the time, groups began breaking down with their healer getting under attack.

“Jun, this way!”

“Got it, I’m counting on you!”

As the swift Killer Pandas’ hits rained down on Jun, he changed course to rush over towards Yukaria. She was glowing a bit, and she began moving in a weird way.

This was the gunslinger’s ability.

“Burst Mode!”

Just as she said that, Yukaria pointed her guns at the four Killer Pandas that were chasing Jun. Her bullets hit each of them equally again and again. The now-angered Killer Pandas switched targets and went after her, slipping by Jun in the process.

The bullets in her two guns should have run out from all of those consecutive shots…

Yukaria threw her handguns away. As they fell to the ground and disappeared, two new handguns appeared out of nowhere in her holsters. She quickly drew them out.

That was Burst Mode, a gunslinger’s special ability. Usable once every five minutes, for about fifteen seconds, it would allow for immediate reloading just by letting go of the guns. Though it didn’t work for revolvers, because it could create an endless supply of bullets…

“Two more are sleeping~”

Though right now, she had one more sleep bullet loaded, the rest of her bullets were regular ones. Two of the enemies chasing Yukaria began to sleep, and the other two started dealing damage to her. However, Yukaria let go of her guns and swiftly jumped out of their way. New guns again appeared in her holsters.

“This is basically what parking is. The non-damaging light warrior’s taunt works very well with gunslingers.”

“Got it. Uh, I’m probably not as good as the light warrior in your last group though…”

“No matter. Kasumi, you’re very much a technical person.”

Yukaria shot at the Killer Pandas that were about to wake up with new sleep bullets. Even if they could resist the sleep bullets by some chance, the controller could still fulfill his or her objective by using another when the monsters would attack the tank.

While Yukaria and Kasumi were hard at work in battle, Eri buffed Jun.

“Let’s take them out one at a time.” Jun picked the more suitable of the sleeping Killer Pandas, imbued magic into his greatsword, and with all of his strength, slashed down at its stomach. “Eri, I’m counting on you for healing!”

“Yeah, yeaah.”

The amount of enemies they had to fight went down. Jun, while taking his own protection into consideration, began to attack the Killer Panda over and over again. Its HP bar was mostly depleted. In retaliation, the ferociously enraged panda clawed many times at Jun’s chest. With each of its light claw attacks, ten percent of Jun’s HP bar

disappeared.

“Heal me on time!”

He said “on time”, and Eri’s timing of healing spells was certainly impeccable. Jun’s HP bar jumped back and forth between fifty percent and eighty percent.

Thanks to his buffs, Jun’s movements were swift and nimble. Without disregarding the other members of the group, sometimes, he was able to avoid attacks with just some quickly thought-out movements. The monsters jumped around in hot haste, resulting in a rather silly situation, but…

Turning its head around, one Killer Panda opened its mouth and roared, showing off its sharp, shiny fangs. Its saliva dripping, it glared at Jun with its glowing-red eyes.

“…You’re not cute at all.”

Very little remained of the final monster’s HP. Jun, continuing to cast attack spells in sync with others, further lowered the Killer Panda’s HP with fierce strikes like raging fires.

The Killer Panda, taking a fatal stab, fell to the ground. Items appeared immediately after, stacked on top of its dead body.

They were peaches. When he squinted, Jun could see the words “Hermit Peach” displayed above the items.

“Well, seems just about right. They should be rare.”

“Hey, they look yummy.”

“Though I don’t mind if you eat them, they can be used in alchemy. Maybe we should take them over to Isao’s place.”

“Maybe we should. Well then, Kasumi, which should we hit next?”

“Ah, okay. Wait on the right hand side please.”

As the Killer Pandas were killed one by one, the controller’s job became easier and easier.

Before long, all of the Killer Pandas had been vanquished.
Though in the few hours up until they went back, they had killed over fifty more Killer Pandas, they were only able to obtain three Hermit Peaches. It seemed like that the first one was just the result of being very lucky.

Having completed several quests, Jun and the rest of the group triumphantly set out on their way back.

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Chapter 1: The Raid
Part 14

Late that night, Jun was lying down in bed in his room. Sensing a presence, he suddenly woke up from his light sleep.

Next to him was a person. A short girl.

“Is it you, Alice?”

Getting up, Jun grabbed the piece of magic augite and lightly rubbed it. The stone, only about the size of a fingernail, dimly lit up the room.

The silver-haired girl stood motionlessly next to the bed.

“You should have woken me up when you’ve come here.”

“It’s not like I had anything urgent to say,” said Alice, monotonously, as she slowly shook her head.

“Were you watching me sleep? What weird interests you have.”

“Stop praising me. You’re making me feel shy.”

“…Hey, are you really here for no reason?”

“Well actually, I do have something to say.”

“Go ahead.”

“You’ve been on this island for one whole month. That’s a long time.”

“So you’re telling me to hurry up and go higher?”

“You slack off too much.”

“You’re too harsh.” Jun smiled bitterly. “I finished the four sacred beast quest with some other guys, and I wanted to complete all of the quests on the island of Lao Thai. I’ll be done soon.”

“What a perverted quest maniac.”

She sounded serious with her monotonous tone of voice. Thinking about her nonsense, Jun grinned.

Alice gracefully lifted her eyebrow, as if she had felt something disrupt her calm and composed comportment.

“So, is it a lie that you’re going to go and try to overtake Sakuya?”

“Did you see that?”

So far, since the day of the duel with Sakuya, Alice had not yet shown herself. Jun thought that possibly, she herself had been unable to leave Altaria Island, but… with all due respect, it was quite possible that she was part of the management of this game… rather, this world known as Sky World.

“You came here to see the end of the blue sky.”

“I’m not obligated to do so.”

“It’s not an obligation. It’s a privilege.”

“… What are you saying?” Jun was met with a firm stare from Alice. “You won’t answer things that are inconvenient for you, right?”

“Why did you add another person to your group?”

“About Yukaria… She’s not necessarily a full member of the group yet.”

“Isn’t a harem every boy’s dream?”

“Hey…”

“Don’t you want lots of boobies [1]?”

“If I said I liked breasts, would you change your avatar for me?”

Alice shook her head slowly. Jun had a rough idea of how her avatar worked and whether she was actually shocked by what he had said.

(Just as I thought, she can’t hide her thoughts so easily.)

“At any rate, our airship hasn’t returned to port yet.”

Their airship was currently lent out. An acquaintance of Jun’s who happened to be a cook was using it to set out on an expedition with about ten people to complete a cooking quest on Altaria Island.

“Preparations will be done very soon. Whether Yukaria will come with us is besides the point.” As he said that, he noticed that there was something else he wanted to ask. “Her friends got married in Sky World. Would children born here be revived in the same way as adventurers after death? When they are born, will they be given tablets?”

As expected, Alice remained still and just stared at Jun.

“Well, I guess I’ll find out one year from now.”

“Are you going to take your merry time?”

“…You really are being influenced by Eri.”

Alice shook her head.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

[1] – There’s a pun here in the original Japanese: oppai ga ippai. I can’t leave this out because it’s just too… punny.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 2: The Curse of the Pyramid
Part 2

The day after the Panda-killing expedition, the inn got very noisy from the morning on.

When Jun went down to the bar, many other adventurers had gathered at the counter. However, Jun's group should have been the only people staying in the inn…

"Kasumi is teaching a cooking class," said the sulking Eri.
She had been leaning her elbow on the corner of the table and supporting her chin on top of her hand.

"About Yukaria's previous group mates, they're leaving on their honeymoon today, so Yukaria went to go see them off."

"Ah, alright."

They said that they were going to spend two weeks going on tours for rich people around many different islands for their honeymoon. From an ordinary person's point of view, adventurers are extremely rich. Especially Yukaria's group, which had reached the fifth island ring, plowed their way through numerous dungeons and amassed many rare treasures. They saved up a lot of money selling such rarities. One could say that their assets were comparable to those of royalty.

Though they had invited Yukaria to join them on their trip, she refused, claiming that she would rather not be tortured by having to watch the two couples flirt all day.

"Eri, aren't you going to join the class?"

"I'll be the official taster. After all, Kasumi, I really can't cook. Hmm, is it not fine just to summon bread or hamburgers?"

This was the age of junk food. In addition, hamburger summoning magic was a very reliable spell for summoners.

There were about twenty people attending Kasumi's class. Around seventy percent made up of women, and thirty percent men. More than half of them were Jun's acquaintances. He remembered those faces belonged to commendable adventurers who had increased their max cooking skill level. Just the other day, they had gone to Altaria Island to increase their cooking level caps. They were immensely thankful for letting them borrow Jun's group's airship. Right now, since another team was going to make the journey to Altaria Island, Jun actually made even more acquaintances than these.

And as for those left here…

"There are really a lot of people from that raid, huh?"

"Kasumi got rather famous back then. Since she was such a brave and impressive tank, many guilds invited her to

join them.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“‘Cause nobody’s told you. Kasumi refused them immediately. She wouldn’t want to be any other than Jun’s wife, of course.”

“Don’t say ‘wife’. Even so, not telling me, the leader…”

“Jun, maybe she doesn’t trust you?” Jun groaned and scornfully glared at Eri. He made a pitiful face. Eri flapped her arms around hastily. “That was just a joke. I know that Kasumi certainly trusts you one hundred percent.”

Jun sighed in relief.

“Okay, let’s wrap this up. That was…”

“But I just thought of something. Okay. A boy who, in spite of realizing a girl’s feelings for him, continues to behave in an indecisive manner is the worst of the worst!”

“… I just remembered I have some errands to take care of. I’m heading out.”

Turning his back to Eri’s smirking face, Jun left the inn.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 2: The Curse of the Pyramid
Part 2

As night fell, Jun and the others had a meeting with a guest at the bar on the first floor of the inn.

The small visitor was none other than Ryuka. She worked as the well-known shopkeeper of the second-hand shop in Payang. Eri and Yukaria both knew Ryuka from a while back.

“I think I stumbled upon something that can benefit us all…”

Ryuka initiated the conversation with Jun and the others. Her eyes twinkled as she saw t Kasumi’s delicious cooking. She had a request to ask of Jun’s group. She wanted to investigate the curse of a pyramid.

“A Pyramid? On this island?” Jun tilted his head. “And also, a curse? True, the mummies on islands like Gradia Island are said to attack with curses but…”

“Yes, a curse. Pyramids, among other things, aren’t really Chinese though.” Ryuka lifted her arms sweetly and dangled them like a weeping willow.

“I don’t think that.” Yukaria shook her head. “Pyramids aren’t just structures that exist in Egypt. Even China has ancient tombs that are pyramid-like in structure. Though I’m not sure if there would be any mummies in them.”

“Hey, Ryuka, do you want to experience that curse?” inquired Eri.

“Why would anybody want to go there to be cursed?” shaking her head, Ryuka responded. “For a skill max increase. Through a quest in the pyramid, one can increase his or her appraisal skill max to 110.”

“Appraisal, huh…?”

When it came to improving the odds in battle, be it through alchemical or combat skills, adventurers did not usually care for the max skill level.

The appraisal skill was a comparatively less important skill. Some rewards from killing monsters occasionally had hidden titles or effects. Depending on the situation, these items, sometimes cursed, could be identified using the appraisal skill.

If an adventurer paid gold to an appraisal NPC in town, the item could almost certainly be identified, no risk involved. The necessary funds, as far as an adventurer was concerned, were not at all large sums.

“Are you going to offer item identification in your shop?”

“We won’t have normal players come and bring us their items for identification. But, if we can promote our shop with it at all, we won’t be people who only seem to be able to run a shop,” Ryuka said calmly, sipping some tea after finishing her meal.

Though Jun was already familiar with it, when he saw such a mature attitude from her, his initial reaction was split into three. He could get upset over her boldness, or be amazed at it, or…

“You’re adorable! Ryuka, you’re an angel!”

“Ryuka-san, you’re lovely! Is it okay if I stroke you gently?”

Yukaria and Kasumi assailed Ryuka’s face from both sides. That was unexpected of the usually meek Kasumi.

“Kasumi, you still sleep with a stuffed toy, right? I have about a hundred of them in my bag, wanna see?” Eri whispered in her ear.

“Teehee, your cheeks are squishy.”

“Your hair is so silky. It feels so nice.”

“Oh, surely Jun too has trained his appraisal skill. I think he’s interested.”

Ryuka calmly looked up at Jun, while Yukaria and Kasumi were still playing with her like a toy. That girl’s presence of mind and composure seemed infallible.

“That pyramid is located in the far north of the island. It’ll probably take a few days to get there.”

“I’m a black magician, so I can teleport us back to the city afterwards. Even so, since we’ll have to be away for multiple days, during that time, Genta-sensei will be tasked with managing the shop.”

“Will Genta-san be okay?”

“If it’s just retrieving the prices by using the system… Worst case scenario, he can just contact me with the communication stone.”

Her former instructor, Genta, was a very good-natured person, so Ryuka said that he was not cut out for business due to that trait.

“If he buys things carelessly or lowers any prices, I said I’d be sure to punish him strictly so… I think it’ll be okay… probably.”

Jun couldn’t help but notice how Genta’s student was treating him.

“I’m interested. I haven’t completed this island’s quest list yet, so there are still many of this kind of secret quests left. I think it’s a great opportunity because I get to go on even more quests! How wonderful! This is great news!”

“Heeey, you shouldn’t get so enthusiastic over it!” retorted Eri, going on to say, “Well, I’m okay with it too.”

“Jun, the second cooking quest group will return in a week.”

“Well, then it’s settled. They’ll collect Altaria Berries.”

Altaria Berries, berries originating on Altaria Island, are the raw materials used in making jam. When Kasumi brought some of the jam to the cooking class earlier, it was very well received.

“I’m happy to work together with Ryuka-san. By all means, let’s do it.”

Jun crossed his shoulders gently and looked at Yukaria. She was still hugging Ryuka, who had her face buried in Yukaria’s chest. She glared at Jun.

“Jun, get your fangs away from this innocent little Ryuka!”

“It’s okay if you’re teasing me, but you’re making Ryuka suffer.”

“Well…”

Ryuka, getting out of Yukaria’s cleavage, looked around, completely exhausted.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 2: The Curse of the Pyramid
Part 3

According to the conversation with Ryuka, the Curse of the Pyramid was the name of a hidden quest in what started out as a tomb for the Emperor of Penglai on the northern part of the island of Lao Thai.

Penglai appeared to have been the ancient name of Lao Thai. About five thousand years earlier, the Penglai dynasty took over many islands in the area.

The last emperor of the Penglai dynasty, just before his death, secluded himself there and performed a ceremony of reincarnation. After some time, he would reincarnate and the Great Penglai Empire would begin anew…

The island of Lao Thai had that backstory.

The Pyramid of the Penglai Emperor stood four days away from the city of Payang with the spell Running. As expected, it was too far away from the town for any quest objects to be nearby. Further north was the cave in which the Black Tortoise of the four sacred beasts dwelled, but the pyramid itself was secluded from everything else by a steep mountain. Moreover, that cave was accessible by means of the teleporter near town.

(So the Pyramid of the Penglai Emperor was isolated completely from everything else, huh?)

When Jun heard Ryuka's story, that was what he thought of first.

Hiding a very important structure in a very inconveniently isolated spot was quite the logical move for the developers. Furthermore, the best possible reward from it was the appraisal skill cap increase, so…

(Perhaps there's something else there?)

Since it harbored so many obstacles, there was quite the possibility that people interested in the few quests found inside or just by idle curiosity would eventually give up.

The island of Lao Thai was designed as a place for newbies to grow and become mid-level players, along as the entrance to the seventh island ring. Maybe that had been reading too deeply into the designers' intentions, but the Pyramid of the Penglai Emperor and other things of the sort felt out of place.

(Something's a bit off here.)

Though, that unnatural vibe meant nothing on its own. If somebody tried to see the whole world, it would make sense that the dynastic tomb was established here. But if it were said that there existed a curse, nobody would want to go near the area.

(I wonder if I'm overthinking this.)

So, Jun, shaking his head, expelled all of his anxieties from his mind.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 2: The Curse of the Pyramid
Part 4

The following morning, Jun and his party, along with Ryuka, departed from the city as a group of five.

There was a steep mountain called Mount Kunlun. Said to house many raid monsters, it was a rather dangerous place. Consequently, in order to avoid it, they took a roundabout route halfway around the island through the west side towards the Pyramid of the Penglai Emperor. With Eri's Running magic, it would take almost four days. On the fourth day, the party would stop and rest for a night near the pyramid, and the day after that, they would explore the pyramid. They would return with the help of Ryuka's black magic return spell to instantly teleport back. That was the schedule.

The Lao Thai housed an active volcano that penetrated the earth in the middle of the island, Kunlun Mountain. The terrain at the center of the island grew very rugged and uneven, but on the edges of the island, it was extremely flat. Moreover, the great visibility meant that even if monsters got near them, they would notice them very quickly.

For this reason, their planned course should turn out quite calm.

During the first day, in order to test their group coordination, they purposely set out for a monster nest. Bomber Bunnies, as those rabbit-like monsters were called, threw peaches that would explode on contact like grenades. Their attack skill was 100, so they were about on par in strength with the party.

As far as Jun's group was concerned, they didn't pose any big challenge in a fight.

Just as they got close to the nest, some of the peach-shaped grenades of the Bomber Bunnies hit the nearby ground in a straight line. That was otherwise known a warning attack to demonstrate their impressive aim.

"Aaaaaaaaaaah! No!! Don't come here!"

Faced with this, the combat-inexperienced Ryuka stopped, standing on tiptoes. She got startled by the attack, panicked, and suddenly followed up by shooting an area of effect attack, Blast Fireball, into the crowd of Bomber Bunnies. The Bomber Bunnies all instantly targeted Ryuka.

"This is bad, I've pulled all of the monsters!"

In order to kill the monsters that stubbornly targetted Ryuka, the rest of the group had to work extremely hard. Afterwards, they tried to avoid battle at all costs.

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Part 5

They secured a campsite before night had fallen. That was the trick to having a safe and comfortable trip. Taught by the few experienced campers and former boy scouts, much of the adventurer population had now become pros at camping.

Ryuka, who had rarely left the city, was unable to help set up the conjured tent or gather firewood and stones, and so felt dispirited.

“Don’t worry, it’s okay…” Kasumi received Jun’s instructions and took Ryuka with her to the nearby river to go bathe.

“Aren’t I pitiful?” With water up to her torso, Ryuka sighed. “In battle or in camping, I’m nothing but a burden.”

She was already in her sixth year of elementary school, and hadn’t worried about that stuff before. It was simple.

(I don’t understand.)

Kasumi didn’t like people who encouraged others. Kasumi Yukasaki was, one way or another, the type of person who others always encouraged. She was encouraged by many people, such as Jun and Eri.

Though Jun should have known…

She suddenly realized it.

She hugged Ryuka, who was shivering from the cold river water.

“Let’s do it openly.”

“Huh…”

“Even if we make mistakes, let’s enjoy ourselves. At least, I found it fun to be able to go on a trip with you, Ryuka-san.”

“Huh, but… it’s my fault that everybody’s going to deal with so much dangerous stuff.”

“Even if that happens, it doesn’t mean that we would give up our lives. This is a world where we can come back to life after death. …Are you scared?”

“…yeah.”

“Well then, let’s enjoy being scared.”

“Enjoying… being scared? But that’s…”

“At first, I too didn’t really understand how I could do that. I wasn’t able to enjoy myself. But then, I met Jun-san… He was having fun no matter what he did in this world. He was traveling alone, and yet he was so lively.”

She remembered. She remembered the time when Jun gave up some of his own time to train Kasumi.

Jun said that understanding and appreciation lead to enjoyment. That was certain; the shortest route to joy was learning about the rules of the world, the way things were organized, and the nature of existence.

At first, she didn’t understand what any of that meant.

He also said to keep in mind monsters’ movement patterns when fighting, and that by acting with that in mind, one could always respond to enemies’ attacks. As she was thinking about these things almost as if she was daydreaming… she realized.

She realized that she had fallen into a daze.

Kasumi Yukasaki seriously, and sincerely, wanted to take on the world. She felt like she wanted to reel in the unknown. She shivered in light of this new breakthrough.

(——This is fun.)

She realized that she already felt that way for a while now.

“Let’s be excited. Surely you can do that, Ryuka-san.”

“But… I’m a coward. My cowardice led me to seclude myself in the shop. In the secondhand shop, I’m known as important and clever, even as an elementary school student.”

“Ryuka-san, you *are* clever. But it’s fine to be a silly fool sometimes. It’s fun.”

“Well if you can say that, Kasumi, I think you’re really strong.”

Kasumi smiled bitterly. She was not strong at all. She knew that. “It’s just that everybody is supporting me.” Jun and Eri, and possibly Sakuya, who was somewhere far away, were always supporting her, so she was able to feel so happy. “Ryuka-san, there are lots of people out there like Genta-san who are supporting you too.”

“Genta-sensei…right, maybe I really am being supported everywhere.”

She pondered over why.

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Even while camping, Kasumi made the food herself. Since she kept pre-prepared ingredients in her bag, she could always heat it later over a small fire.

Unable to conjure up anything other than bread, Jun made use of his cooking skill to summon fresh baked goods out of flour. Though raising the cooking skill would not result in tastier bread, it allowed access to new recipes. Jun's cooking skill level, exceeding the original max for the skill, allowed him to make small pastries.

"Kasumi's cooking still tastes better than pastries," said Eri, who sadly, did not approve of the new recipe.

Besides, recently, Eri had some extra time and instead of using it to annoy anybody she raised her fishing level, so she could fish in freshwater rivers. Today she caught three chicken grunts, a type of perch, and Jun filleted them with his cooking skill.

"Amazing. This is so much better than what Genta-sensei makes."

"It really is magnificent. My former group was no match for this brilliant cooking."

Bread, soup, and salad were set up on the wooden table. Ryuka and Yukaria were flabbergasted by Jun's group's normal meal.

"By the way, I have a question. Yukaria, speaking of your group, what kind of stuff did you guys eat while on trips?"

"We can always live on just bread and water, right?"

"Aah, your group… Next time, buy a fishing rod!"

Upon discovering that Yukaria's group was full of people who did not understand the value of good food, Eri took Yukaria's hand.

Jun thought that generally, people who did not care much about cooking had huge appetites.

Actually, it was obvious that Eri and Yukaria's appetites were weird. Each eating more than Jun and Kasumi combined, those two girls scarfed down huge portions. Their appetites were so great that Ryuka's eyes rounded as she saw all of the food spread out on the table get devoured in just a moment between the two of them.

"That was delicious! Great work on the meal!"

"Ugh, I can't eat anymore…"

Yukaria and Eri both hit their stomachs and rolled onto the ground. They really resembled each other.

"We ate so much. I didn't think that we'd need more than two pieces of bread."

“We’re growing girls!”

“Ri-right! We walked a looot today.”

“Yes, we did. When you take a trip, I think it’s okay to eat a lot.”

“We even get snacks. Kasumi’s the best.”

Today they took a break and had a light meal every two hours. Though they took Ryuka’s travelling inexperience into consideration, they would still take a break every three hours or so. Kasumi was very big on replenishing calories. It seemed like it came from Sakuya.

“While traveling, there’s a lot of mental strain. But there was a time, when I wasn’t paying attention, that I ended up falling to the ground as if my internal battery had been drained. Since we can’t have that happen again, we need to take care to constantly replenish our energy.”

Kasumi told them that earlier.

(Where in the world did she learn that?)

At that time, Jun had smiled bitterly, though he did incorporate her suggestion into their plans. He thought that Sakuya too probably wanted to eat her sweets.

“Anyways, Jun. Are we really all going to sleep in a single tent?” Yukaria, seeing the large tent, glanced at Jun and glared at him.

Jun shrugged lightly. “We don’t have to. I can put up another tent by myself right now. Actually, I think we should do that. Especially since Ryuka’s with us this time.”

“Ah, I’m fine! Actually, uhh… if we all sleep together, we can enjoy ourselves more. Kasumi taught me this…” She looked at Kasumi with a grin on her face. It was a saintly smile.

Jun sighed. “Yukaria, what do you want to do?”

“If you all say so, I don’t mind. But Jun, you’re the biggest threat.”

“Then I’ll sleep next to Jun!” Ryuka raised her hand quickly. Everybody looked at her. “Huh, what happened?”

“…Ryuka-chan, you’re a friend, so believe me, he’s the biggest enemy to us…”

“Well, as long as it’s not near the entrance, I can sleep anywhere,” said Eri. After making sure that Kasumi and Yukaria were washing the tableware, she moved closer to Ryuka’s ear and said, “Ryuka, stay alert. Jun is definitely a lolicon… Ouch!”

Jun had kicked Eri’s leg from under the table. She pressed on her knee and glared at Jun, teary-eyed.

“Don’t feed her improper things.”

“Well then. Though you don’t reach your hand even a little bit to Kasumi… hey, could it be that since there aren’t any other boys here, you’re going for…”

“Don’t tell little kids things that they don’t need to know! I’m quite normal! Well… what, Ryuka?”

Ryuka, who had just come near him, pulled at Jun’s sleeve earnestly.

“I’m fine. I won’t mind it even if you’re gay, Jun. I won’t tell anybody, I promise.”

Her eyes were very gentle, as if she were trying to console him. Jun looked up at the sky.

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The group lay down in a row in their sleeping bags.

Shortly after, snores and soft breaths filled the tent. Ryuka, who was next to Jun, slipped into the realm of dreams in just a few seconds. She had surely been worn out by all that walking, something she was not used to.

“Jun, are you awake?” asked Yukaria, who was in the middle of the tent.

Kasumi and Eri appeared to have already drifted off.

“What?”

“I don’t think I’m saying this because of how my previous group broke up, but… it’s not good to put things off.” Jun remained silent while Yukaria took an exaggerated sigh. “I understand the feeling of wanting to avoid situations that have been complicated by people in love. It’s really nothing but trouble. But, even if you run away from every such situation, the comfortable status quo will one day… collapse. Jun, back when you were with my old group, you said that yourself. That you wanted to form a nice and cozy group. And if you were able to adventure forever with one of those warm groups… surely coming to this world would have been worth it…”

He had a feeling that he had indeed said those things to Yukaria before. It had been just immature speech. Hearing his own words come out from her mouth after all that time couldn’t help but embarrass him.

“Eri and Kasumi are both good kids. Can you trust them more?”

“I do trust them.”

“These are your own feelings.”

“Hey, doesn’t this make you feel awkward?”

“I like lengthy, sloppy, hard-to-understand, and, while I’m at it, pervy things..”

“Forgive me for causing all of this confusion.”

Jun shook his head.

(My mind is all jumbled up…)

There were things that he couldn’t say to anybody.

That only Jun had come to this world in a different way from the others. About Alice.

About Kai/Sakuya. About their battle. That she had entrusted Kasumi to him.

And also, about the meaning of ‘the end of the blue sky’.

The future wasn’t far away.

It had already been decided that one day, he would have to leave the current comfortable lifestyle and try to make it to the end of the end. That life-and-death journey would surely become very emotionally straining.

If he consulted Eri and Kasumi, they would definitely follow him. He was a bit conceited in thinking so.

However, though he was prepared to bear the burdens of that outcome, Jun had yet to…

“I don’t know what you’re hiding. It’s something that you can’t tell anybody, right?” Yukaria saw right through Jun’s innermost troubles. “Earlier, I heard you’re looking for somebody.”

“Yeah,” responded Jun.

“Have you met up with that person?” Jun smiled bitterly. Yukaria was quite sharp. “You two didn’t see eye-to-eye on something?”

“Kind of.”

“Before you collapse from all that stress, why don’t you tell those two?”

“…Uhh.”

“They’re waiting for you.”

He probably realized this. It would be quite difficult to say. Kasumi and Eri were both smart. It wouldn’t have been strange if they sensed something like that coming.

Even so, they trusted Jun. Jun used that trust as a stepping stone for his own intentions.

“Aren’t I cruel?”

“You should watch out for anybody stabbing you from behind.”

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Running was a spell that allowed a group to move twice as fast. With movement speed increasing spells from rear line classes like black magicians, white magicians, druids, and oracles, a group could continue moving quickly for a very long time, unless a member of the group took any aggro. Though summoners also possessed a spell with the same effect, other support classes only had a few movement increase spells at their disposal, such as Marathon Song for bards and Polymorph, an ability of druids.

Jun's group sped up their progress by Running. From afar, it looked as if they were speeding through.

It took them almost four days to reach the Pyramid of the Penglai Emperor from the southern tip of the city of Payang.

"First of all, why is there even an appraisal skill quest in a pyramid?" Eri tilted her head, perplexed, as they sprinted through the grasslands. "There should be other hidden quests."

The phrase "hidden quest" encompassed two meanings. One consisted in a quest that an adventurer could not receive easily because it was hidden on the island somewhere unreachable by normal means. Those quests were still shown in the quest list though, thus confirming their existence.

The other meaning was for a quest that was not shown on the quest list. These were quests that were not known until they were completed.

The quest Jun's group had in mind now was a quest of the latter variety, at least until a flag got triggered. If nobody had reached the maximum level for the appraisal skill, the quest would not have even been discovered.

"Could it be that this isn't the only appraisal skill cap increase quest?" wondered Jun.

The quest had an aura of mystery about it. It appeared magnificent. Jun trembled in excitement.

"Jun, you're crazy…"

"Somebody is bad-tempered."

Yukaria and Eri's eyes met each other with scowls.

"Leave me alone. Hey, Ryuka, do you have any other information about the quest?"

"From what I heard, the ghost of the emperor should appear."

"G-ghost?!" Kasumi raised her voice hysterically.

"Even if we say it's a ghost, at best, it's just some monster that looks like a spirit." Eri chuckled, calming Kasumi

down. Ryuka even nodded her head in agreement.

“It’s probably something like that. The ghost of Penglai seems like it’d approach you with something like ‘Grant my wish’ …”

“So the quest involves granting one of the ghost’s requests?”

Chain quests commonly had a lot of monster extermination quests in a row. Hidden quests shouldn’t have been too different.

“The people who discovered this quest brought the ghost of Penglai to the middle of the pyramid. If that’s how it happened the ghost could disappear at any time. Their message said that if we investigate quickly, we might be able to unlock a higher appraisal skill cap.”

“So there’s a flag somewhere in the pyramid that can be triggered by bringing an NPC to it… There sure is a lot I don’t know.”

“Uh, I’m sorry that you guys are coming with me for all this investigating.”

“No need to be sorry. We’ll definitely have fun in the process!” Jun made his hand firmly into a fist. “A mysterious quest… an unidentified flag… an unknown maze… I’m going to get a nosebleed.”

“You sure are a quest-maniac. Once you get like this, there’s nothing we can say to stop you. Ryuka, please be wary of this weirdo.”

“There’s no problem with that. Any weirdo that can be of use to me is a good weirdo.” Ryuka giggled. She was very excited about what would soon happen.

Undeveloped wastelands spanned across the northern parts of the island of Lao Thai. The monsters were all the more powerful. Back when Jun’s group had only consisted of three people, they surely would not have been able to survive long there. Either way, since they didn’t have any quests nearby, they traveled the area trying not to attract any monsters…

Since they avoided any monster attacks, they proceeded with their trip as planned. On the fifth morning, Jun’s group finally made it to the pyramid situated at the bottom of a deep valley on the edge of the wasteland.

At first glance, the structure, as big as any of the hills around there, was drowning in weeds. They couldn’t miss the fact that the area around the exquisite gates was all mossy.

Jun fiddled with his tablet in front of the gate. If this pyramid dated to the age of the ancient Penglai empire, the appraisal skill quest would be there. It had to be the Pyramid of the Penglai Emperor. For the time being, Jun explained how the appraisal skill worked.

“Having the appraisal skill is definitely useful.”

“But raising skill levels is a pain,” Yukaria said, echoing the popular opinion among adventurers.

“How long does it take to get a skill to level 100?” Kasumi inquired. Jun and Ryuka exchanged glances and tilted their heads thinking about how to answer.

“Hmm, maybe like 100 hours?”

“Yeah, sounds about right.”

“A h-hundred hours… I’ve definitely spent more time on it than that,” muttered Eri, chiming in.

“Me too…” added Yukaria.

It would only take twenty days if I were to appraise items for five hours each day before sleeping.

Adventurers could manage with holding back and only sleeping three hours a night, only being a little bit tired during the day. Perhaps they would keep on wondering whether that really was possible.

“By the way, Jun, your cooking and alchemy skills are also at level 100 right? Was the time well spent?”

“I’ve maxed out gathering, sewing, handicraft, and gem-working. But I haven’t done smithing yet.”

Skilling was difficult. It required a lot of monetary investment. Jun remembered. He had to buy tons of expensive jewels and use them up very quickly. It was hell. He never wanted to experience that again. At any rate, expensive diamonds disappeared, one by one.

After he finished leveling up gemworking, he earned a considerable amount of money making enchanted gemstones for other adventurers.

“…Just as I thought. Jun, you’re a nutjob.”

“It’s natural. Nothing special about that. Everybody does it.”

“I don’t do it. I don’t.” Eri shook her hand back and forth, shocked.

“Really? But the time spent really isn’t that bad. You can use other skills while waiting for each skill’s cooldown to elapse. Besides, there’s no end to the knowledge you can get out of it. If you’re the type that can’t focus his or her energy just for that, then you really are a huge procrastinator.”

“That type’s also the kind that can’t stay holed up in a library… Your willingness is quite weird. In addition, in order to just get your alchemy skills to 100, you need your own private area to work…”

“Alchemy is necessary to complete a lot of quests. Won’t you be annoyed if you trigger the flags for those quests that you can’t even do?”

Though he was insisting strongly on his point of view, the prospects were not looking up. Kasumi and Ryuka stared motionlessly at Jun.

“My, my, you guys aren’t very cultured at all.”

“…If I responded to that with a witty retort, you’d be upset.” Eri groaned as she placed her hand on her eyebrows.

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Chapter 2: The Curse of the Pyramid
Part 9

Caves and ruins were commonly known as Dungeons.

The word dungeon, which originally represented an underground prison, evolved to mean what it does now through a largely unknown transformation. In MMORPGs, dungeon areas differed from regular fields in many ways.

First of all, the difference showed in monsters, and traps were rather common… in other words, dungeons had to be dealt with differently.

“Kasumi-san, this is your first time taking part in a bonafide dungeon raid, right?” inquired Jun, looking up at the pyramid that looked like a slightly elevated hill.

“Back when I was with Sakuya, we went through a maze on the eighth island ring.”

“Dungeons on the eighth ring, with a few exceptions, don’t really have any elaborate traps. And, the monsters are weak there. There’s a steep curve between dungeons on the eighth ring, and those of higher rings. If it were just us three, like how we were in regular fields, dungeons would be quite scary.”

“Can Jun-san even be scared of anything?” Ryuka tilted her head.

“If it were just me, I definitely wouldn’t be. If I had to complete a dungeon for a quest, I would just join another party and do it that way. Honestly speaking, a party with six people would be great.”

“Now that I think of it, Sakuya-chan also made sure we had six people. What’s up with that number?”

“Ah, is that your question?”

“I wonder why that could be the case,” said Ryuka, who apparently also did not know.

“Alright, I’ll explain quickly. So basically, Sky World’s system has no restriction on the number of people in a group. According to the system though, groups are just an umbrella term for allies. Understand?”

“Yep. If I’m not mistaken, even if allies accidentally get hit by area of affect attacks, they would take damage. And afterwards, any enemies that the group of allies killed could easily take back control of the area.”

“Right. Though, when Sky World was still just an MMO, targeting was quite easy, and there were many other conveniences… basically, groups allowed for the differentiation between friend and foe.” Jun continued, “However, in practice, players usually split up into smaller groups of six.”

“The biggest reason for having six person groups was that spells and skills that affected multiple people were all limited to a maximum of six people.”

“Area buffs and movement spells, right?” responded Ryuka. She, being a black magician, had many of such spells.

“The most salient point for black magicians is definitely the use of the Teleport spell. If there was only one black magician in a team of seven or more people, somebody would be left behind after casting the spell.”

“That’s not useful at all for escaping.”

“Some time ago, Ryuka set her bind point to the one near the entrance to these ruins. If necessary, she could use Group Teleport to retreat back to that bind point.”

“Right. When going into an unexplored dungeon, I want us to be as prepared as possible. However, if we have to flee, we have to be quick. So, in order to fully take advantage of wizardry, six person teams widely became the norm for the smallest fighting unit.”

“Though if it’s us five, I think we can synergize rather well.”

“We have a tank, a front line attacker, a rear line attacker, a healer, and a controller, including somebody who can allow us to escape in case of emergency, and we at least have the most basic buffs. White magicians are also the most desirable healing class for dungeon runs. Though I would prefer to have a sub-healer too for some peace of mind but… we’re not carefully selecting people from within a guild, so this is pretty much on-point.”

In Sky World, there were fifteen classes, each with its own traits, specialties, and weaknesses. The idea of forming teams was that their different respective capabilities could fill in for another’s weaknesses.

“So, I think I can safely say that we should be able to successfully clear this dungeon. But then… the problem is how we go about doing it.” Jun took a few steps down and looked up at the peak of the hill. “… Hey, I just thought of this, but doesn’t this pyramid seem a little bit suspicious?”

“Suspicious?” Eri repeated his word.

“There’s probably another way in from behind.”

“Jun, you sure like saying that.”

“Well, this *is* a royal tomb. With such a welcoming entrance… I think this could only be a trap. If it were me, I would have definitely made this to be a dummy entrance.”

“Jun, your triumphant look makes me reluctant to take your side…” Eri dropped her shoulders and shook her head. “I understand… Perhaps even the pyramids in Egypt had dummy entrances. I’ve heard stories of them.”

“Luckily, it seems like there aren’t any monsters nearby. Let’s disperse and search for other entrances. If you see anything, shout to let us know.”

Then, Jun activated his Wing Boots and flew into the sky.

Searching from high up in the sky could help gather more information from a different point of view.

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It didn't take long until they located the hidden entrance. Not only that, they found a whole three of them.
"Whoever designed this must have been a real lover of everything hidden." Eri was stunned.

"… Well, I didn't anticipate this development," moaned Jun, scratching his head.

After Jun had opened his paint application on his tablet and transmitted his automatically generated maps to the others using infrared, the gang sat in a circle and thought about it deeply.

"Whoever made this map of the pyramid definitely did not do it the normal way."

"This doesn't seem like the job of somebody being paid by the hour. But maps in Sky World always got me worked up."

"Do you know where in the pyramid we'll meet the ghost?" asked Ryuka who was deep in thought with her hand on her mouth. "Hmm… surely before we fall into a pit… So, if we go in here…"

"These three rear entrances are dummy ones," Eri said, as she frowned at Jun.

Skepticism filled the air.

"Ryuka, is it okay even if we don't take the shortest route there?"

"Yeah. Having some of Jun's favorite food is good enough for me."

"Let's try going in through the entrance near the top of the pyramid."

"What's the purpose of doing that?" asked Eri.

"It's my intuition," Jun responded with a smile on his face.

Though the hidden entrance was very small, the passageway inside was more than three meters wide and its ceiling about four meters high. It allowed them to easily keep their weapons ready. Since the walls were well illuminated, it was bright enough that they could see each other's faces.

"I'm going to go check out what's in front of us. Eri, invisibility magic, please."

"Please, be careful. I won't make any jokes about the gate being a one way door."

"From here, we'll keep in contact by communication stone."

Jun, turning invisible thanks to Eri's magic, quietly set off towards the inner part of the pyramid. The invisibility spell, usable by many spellcasters, would allow its target to disappear for a set amount of time. It was immensely effective

against monsters that only relied on their sense of sight, as one could go up close to them without risking detection. However, for monsters that used their senses of smell or hearing, there was a limit to its efficacy. As soon as the invisible adventurer took any aggro, the spell would instantly end. It wasn't very useful for anything other than reconnaissance.

Furthermore, in cities, such magic was prohibited. In inns and in public bathhouses, barriers would automatically dispel invisibility. It came in naturally to counteract unscrupulous breaches of privacy.

The passageway led to a staircase. Jun carefully walked down them. The stairs, which surely had not been used for a long time, had overgrown with moss and fungus. They were very slippery.

At the bottom of the stairs, there was a fork in the road.

The wind is blowing…

The gentle breeze brushing his face came from the left.

Jun stayed vigilant of his surroundings and entered the dungeon.

A few minutes later, when Jun returned to the rest of the group, Kasumi and Ryuka took huge breaths of relief.

Eri frowned, groaning, "You're soooooooo slooooooooow."

"We were worried sick."

"Sorry. Unfortunately, I don't have good news."

Jun wirelessly copied the automatically generated map from his reconnaissance efforts to the others. They pinned their eyes onto their tablet screens.

"…Wow, it's a headache-inducing maze!"

"Honestly, I got a bit lost myself. I never really had any sense of direction."

"So why was somebody without any sense of direction in charge of scouting?"

"Considering what might happen if enemies attacked, it was best for me to go. And also… Yukaria would have frozen up, ran away, and forgotten everything."

"I'll have you know, I'm just bad with dark places. Besides, the monsters in a place like this would be undead ones. Sleep Bullet wouldn't work on them. I'd have to hit them with my hands."

Undead. It referred to a dead body that could move. In Sky World, monsters like zombies and skeletons were collectively referred to as undead monsters.

Undead monsters differed a lot from regular ones. First of all, they were completely immune to certain status effects, such as paralysis and sleep. On the other hand, white magicians' special anti-undead attacks would work very effectively against them. This was switched for regular monsters.

"There weren't any undead monsters."

"So you're saying there were other types of monsters?" Eri asked.

"Just Puppet Dolls, or moving doll-like creatures. They're like golems."

"Either way, Sleep Bullet still won't work on them."

Yukaria dropped her shoulders slowly. Neither dolls nor golems were susceptible to sleep or paralysis.

“Well, it isn’t as spacious as the passageway. Only two or three bodies could stand side by side there, and only if they were particularly small. Except for when the battle becomes close ranged, if Kasumi-san and I are in the front, we should manage.”

Unlike in an open field, dungeons had the physical limitation of walls. Though one would not need to worry about being surrounded by large armies of monsters, the lack of room to orchestrate traps was vexing. Jun’s specialty, tactics that required good placement and movement would not work here.

“Let’s destroy all of the monsters in the mapped areas. We can take up our positions at the place where the road splits and take them out one by one. Kasumi-san and Ryuka, please gradually get used to the dungeon.”

In order to be able to investigate the area, the dungeon must have first been cleared. In Sky World, monsters in remote dungeons wouldn’t respawn sooner than in a few hours a few hours, so once they have been all killed once, the area could be safely searched.

Puppet Dolls were wooden dolls with spherical joints that gave off the impression of golem type monsters. Each only one meter tall, they were about as big as a small child. Though, several of them could attack at once, sometimes up to ten of them.

However, they didn’t seem to have any special attacks, so they just recklessly attacked by slamming their hands, instead of with sticks or bludgeons. Their attack skill level was 100, so they were green even to Ryuka. Basically, they were just little minion monsters that weren’t very strong.

It took about an hour to clear the Puppet Dolls area.

“It’s fine no matter how many Puppet Dolls there are. Kasumi-san, can you protect Ryuka? I’m counting on you.”

“Ye-yes! Please leave it to me!” Elated upon hearing Jun’s words, Kasumi nodded, bracing herself. Cheerfully taking Ryuka along with her, she disappeared into the interior passage. “Jun, we won’t die!”

“You scoundrel. You’re the worst!”

Yukaria and Eri’s jeering slammed Jun. He left, almost as if to escape them.

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Part 11

Jun had said “I’m counting on you” to her.

That excited her tremendously.

As Kasumi inspected the ceiling, walls, and floor of the area, she had a huge smile on her face, unable to hold back her delight. Ryuka, having steadily watched her, sighed and said, “You’re such a little girl in love.”

“He-he-heeey, what are you talking about?!”

“Jun, you like him, don’t you?”

“… Yes.”

“That’s why you’re acting weird.”

“But… I, uh, am always being dragged around…”

“I don’t think so. Though I haven’t come on many adventures yet, Kasumi, I think you’re a really good light warrior. You don’t seem at all like a newbie to MMOs.” Ryuka glanced up at Kasumi. As if she noticed something in her facial expression, she smiled brightly.

“I respect you a lot, being able to like Jun this much.”

“He saved me.”

“On Altaria, right? I heard from Jun himself. But he also said that you work very hard and that he definitely wouldn’t have been able to have done it without your help.”

“I… just tried to do what Jun-san said. Though even now, I still can’t do everything myself.”

Some time ago, that was the case. She thought that in the future, she herself would be the one sent to do reconnaissance. Surely if she got attacked by strong monsters, she would have been able to endure the attacks until she returned to the rest of the group. Either way, Jun didn’t have any option other than Kasumi. That was sad.

“You aren’t enjoying yourself, right?” asked Ryuka. Kasumi couldn’t utter a response. “God. Kasumi, and even after you came clean with this… you’re pitiful.”

“I am… I’m sorry.”

“H-hey, don’t just agree with me like that!” For some reason, she panicked. Ryuka, who had apologetically curled up into a ball, smiled cutely. “Ugh, I’m not that good at cheering people up.”

“I didn’t know. Ryuka-san, I thought you were more calm and composed.”

“Lots of people say that I am for my age. Though I’m not. I just don’t show many facial expressions. In reality, I’m bad at getting angry or laughing out loud.”

“Like just now, when you suddenly panicked?”

“That was… I was just really surprised. That you would respond like that, though I think that I incited it… this is difficult.” Ryuka put her hand on her face and sighed. “Since sensei is usually one to agree obediently like that.”

“Genta-san…”

“Guess it can’t be helped. Kasumi, last time you cheered me up. This time, it’s my turn to return the favor.”

“Uh, uhh. It’s fine if you don’t do so much.”

“No, this is about my honor as a merchant. I’ll do whatever I can.” Ryuka made her hand firmly into a fist. “Well, as it stands, I’m a young girl with some knowledge about relationships. I at least know the basics of love.”

At that moment, Ryuka seemed like Eri.

While they had been chatting, Kasumi and Ryuka managed to fully investigate the area.

According to Jun, they should have been watchful of signs of hollow areas when hitting the floor and walls with sticks. If the hit sounded hollow, it was possible that there was a secret passageway behind.

“I’m thinking about other patterns of traps, but I don’t know much about hidden passages.”

In accordance with what Jun had said, the two of them walked around hitting the walls, floor, and ceiling with three-meter-long sticks.

It was quite tedious. However, it was a task they couldn’t afford to neglect.

Kasumi completely forgot that they were in a dungeon. Ryuka most likely also did too.

“When you hit with the stick, first hit the floor, then the wall, and then finally, the ceiling. That’s the order in which it should be done. Only when you confirm the floor to be secure can you advance.”

They did not abide by what Jun told them to do.

Just as Kasumi took a step, she noticed immediately.

I haven’t tapped this part of the floor yet!

She was too late. Instead of feeling a hard stone floor, her body sank into the ground.

The floor disappeared.

“Kasumi!”

She was too late in realizing that it was a pit trap. Ryuka shrieked and grabbed Kasumi. Kasumi fell, and along with her went Ryuka.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 2: The Curse of the Pyramid
Part 12

They found themselves in darkness, aching all over. After their moans quieted down, they began to move.

“Kasumi, I hope you’re okay.” Ryuka’s voice echoed over their heads. “Wait a moment. Lemmie get some light.”

The fragment of magic augite that she held in her hand illuminated the vicinity.

There appeared to be a stone wall nearby. Kasumi stood up after confirming that she had not suffered any injuries.

“Good thing you’re okay even though you were under me.” Ryuka took out one of her communication stones and frowned. “None of my communication stones are connecting.”

Kasumi hastily checked her own to no avail. It seemed like they were in a special zone in which communication stones were rendered ineffective.

However, would they be able to keep going without contact to Jun or the others? That aside…

“Ryuka-san, let’s try teleporting.”

“Hmm, okay.”

Ryuka nodded and performed a group teleportation spell. A light green circle appeared below their feet…

Then, the spell’s light disappeared.

“… So, it seems teleporting doesn’t work here either.”

“What about a different spell?”

They found spells that didn’t affect movement seemed to work. Communication and movement spells were all that were unusable.

“At any rate, I think they’ll realize we’re missing,” Ryuka said, unfazed by their situation.

“Then we should probably wait here…” After thinking about it a bit, Kasumi shook her head. “Let’s try going further in. I’ll put important things like communication stones into my magic pouch. So, worst case scenario, even if we die, we will still be able to keep in contact with Jun-san and the others.”

The magic pouch was a bound item which Kasumi got as soon as they made it to this island. On death, an adventurer retained whatever was stored within it.

When Kasumi was journeying with Sakuya’s team, she did not possess a magic pouch. For that reason, she couldn’t contact her fellow teammates when she fell to Altaria Island.

“Ryuka-san, wait here please. I think it’s best if only I risk dying.”

“Don’t be so stubborn. Besides, wasn’t all this *my* request?”

When Kasumi started walking away, Ryuka followed behind her.

“If I go in, maybe we’d be able to teleport out.”

That was quite plausible. Kasumi couldn’t refuse her after that reasoning.

The two of them trod a dark passage relying on only their piece of augite to light the way.
Shortly afterwards, the end of the narrow passage opened before them.

They entered a large, mysterious room with a very high ceiling. In the center of the room, there stood a stone coffin at the top of a platform few meters tall. Systematically arranged candlesticks, hung on the sides of the stairs leading to it.

Just as Ryuka and Kasumi stepped foot into the center of the room, the candles lit up all at once.

“Ah!”

Ryuka and Kasumi grabbed tightly onto each other.

Ahh, me, get a grip!

Kasumi let go of Ryuka’s hand and took a step forward.

The floor shook violently.

“Eek, eeeeeeek!” Hugging Ryuka firmly, she staggered ahead. “E-earthquake… Ryuka-san, are you okay?”

“It can’t be… I’ve never heard of earthquakes in Sky World.”

Ryuka calmed Kasumi, who was overwhelmed with surprise, down.

When they looked up at the coffin in the center of the room, its heavy lid appeared to slowly open.

“This is… aaaaaaah!”

They couldn’t stop shivering. Their legs turned to jelly. Ryuka too, shivered unknowingly.

From all they could see, nothing had was touched the coffin.

A stink filled the air. Gray smoke which had begun to pour out of the coffin gradually enveloped the entire room…

“It hath come!” The sound of a deep male voice echoed through the room. “The time hath come! My voice shall be released! My grief! My sorrow! As will my wrath!”

A humanlike figure slowly emerged from the stone coffin.

Its glowing red eyes scowled at Kasumi from their sunken eye sockets.

“Cross thyselves!” shouted the figure.

“Kasumi!”

Just as Ryuka called out her name, Kasumi’s HP bar completely depleted.

“Ryuka!”

While she was losing consciousness, she knew that Ryuka would suffer the same fate soon…

Right before she slipped away, she saw the system message window.

Penglai Emperor’s Death Call has been activated.

That was what was written. Death Call. That was most likely an attack.

The Penglai Emperor, huh?

This message was the last thing Kasumi saw.

Quest: The Resurrection of the Penglai Emperor has begun

“The Penglai Emperor’s… resurrection.”

She didn’t have enough time to process its meaning before her consciousness was swallowed up by the darkness.

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Kasumi awoke in her inn room back at Payang. Kasumi and Eri had kept the room reserved for the duration of their trip. Since she awoke naked, it came in as obvious that she had died.

Her pouch shook nearby. It was a communication stone.

Kasumi took out the vibrating stone out of her pouch. It was Ryuka's. She remembered that the girl must have died right after she herself did. Her bind point should have been a safe zone near the pyramid.

"Kasumi! There's trouble!" yelled Ryuka, who was usually calm and composed. "Look at your quest list! Quick!"

Still a bit confused, Kasumi took out her tablet and did as she was told. When she saw the text displayed on the screen, she gulped loudly.

Quest: The Resurrection of the Penglai Emperor has begun

Appease the wrath of the Penglai Emperor who will resurrect in less than ten days. If this quest is failed, you will die.

Death. Once she saw that word, she bit her lip.

"Kasumi, what's your battery at right now?…"

"A little less than 30% left. In these ten days, I won't be able to revive safely."

In Sky World, death was not final. When adventurers lost all of their HP, they would revive at their bind point.

Each death reduced the battery on their tablets by 40%. It took one day for the battery to charge 1%. And when an adventurer's battery became fully depleted…

Revival would not take place. The deceased adventurer would disappear. Nobody knew where.

"Kasumi…san" All of the color in Ryuka's face was sucked out. Somehow, she managed to utter, "It's okay."

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 3: Raid Guild
Part 1

Kasumi Yukasaki had a dream.
It was a horrible one at that. She was alone in a dark and empty room. The whole time, she heard Jun's dissatisfied voice. Eri was laughing. She wanted to see them and hold their hands. The dense, uncomfortable atmosphere rendered her unable to move. She felt her body weigh her down like lead.
How could this happen?
Then she realized. Kasumi Yukasaki had… passed through death's door a third time.

When she got up from her bed, a distraught Eri welcomed her. Watching her patiently, as soon as she noticed that Kasumi had awoken, Eri got out of the way and began laughing for some reason.
"U-uuh, don't think I'm making fun of you or anything," blurted out Eri.

"Don't worry… please don't. Thank you."

Kasumi dropped her head. The rays of the morning sun had begun to seep into the room through an opening in the window. On a normal day, she would have begun preparing breakfast by now.
"Sorry, I slept in late. I'll head down to the kitchen right now…"
"It's fine. It's fine. Kasumi, you seem tired. Why don't you rest a bit?"
There was a knock at the door. Jun's voice soon followed through the wall.
"I have something to talk about. Since you two seem to be awake, this is a good time to do it. Come down to the first floor."

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 3: Raid Guild
Part 2

Jun entered this world about five months ago. Though he wasn't absorbed in cooking like Kasumi had been, it did manage to satisfy his hunger for adventure, earning him small bursts of pleasure through trial and error.

Spreading some freshly baked bread with butter, adding lettuce and cheese in between two slices and then lightly sprinkling some salt and pepper on top, he made simple sandwiches. If he had the time, he liked to heat up some sausage over a fire too, but for now, all that mattered was preparing something substantial enough to fill up their stomachs.

"While we eat, I want to ask you a few questions."

In the bar on the first floor of the inn where they had been staying, there were ten tables. That morning, Jun's group took up one corner of it. Five people sat together at the table, Jun, Kasumi, Eri, Yukaria, and Ryuka.

"First, let's get things straight. Kasumi and Ryuka, yesterday, you two have received a quest from an NPC you believe to be the Penglai Emperor. And then you two were killed. By an attack called 'Death Call'."

"Now that I think of it, by the time he called out my name, my HP had already dropped all the way to zero."

"Mine too."

What Kasumi and Ryuka described seemed typical of an impact attack.

Until now, Jun had never heard anything about a monster with an instant death attack.

He did not imagine such a monster of the legends could exist.

It was the gods. Sky World's lore said so. The great gods could manipulate humans simply by calling out their names. With only a point of a finger, they could stop hearts. They were just that absolute in power.

They rarely interfered with the people of the physical world. The minstrels sang of tales that once, in an era long gone, the gods could be seen in the skies, but that they all left for another world.

"The Penglai Emperor NPC had to have been a god. Believe me. I think that you two were killed to inform you of that fact. There are lots of people who would behave rashly towards raid monsters."

"But hey, if that were the case, why would the Penglai Emperor disappear in the first place?"

Yesterday, after Kasumi and Ryuka died, they scrambled to contact the others with their communication stones. If they could use them, Teleport should have been usable too.

Though their things stayed with their dead bodies, they first and foremost wanted to tell the others about the Penglai

Emperor.

All that they could find was a single antique book that had fallen from the coffin.

“I don’t know if that book’s for the item identification skill. So what is it? Jun, can you get it identified at an NPC in the city?”

Jun had gone to an appraisal NPC acquaintance of his last night. Though the book was in terrible condition, he succeeded. The result was…

“I just know the name of the item. It’s ‘The Penglai Emperor’s Prophecy’.”

“So it’s something like that… Hey, does that mean you were able to read it?”

“Well, after mulling over it for a night, I realized that I had forgotten the most fundamental details,” Jun said, handing the book over to Kasumi.

“Kasumi-san, try opening it.”

Yesterday, when they tried opening the book, all they could find inside were indecipherable words. Sky World had its own languages. Since it was not Japanese, players were pained by their curiosity to understand how to read and write them. With a high enough linguistics skill level, they could read other local languages.

However, the language in which this book was written was one that was not covered by that skill. Yesterday, the group split up to cover the town and find adventurers who had maxed out the linguistics skill. Though it was possible that it was a language that could only be understood with a linguistics level higher than the currently discovered maximum… which had yet to be discovered since few players were purposefully searching those out.

Sure enough…

“I can read it,” Kasumi said. The others looked at her, astonished. “Ryuka, how about you?”

“Uh… hmm.” Ryuka hastily looked at the text of the prophecy from the side. “Seems like I can read it too.”

They all dropped their shoulders in exhaustion.

“Aren’t we such idiots? We should have known that only characters who have the quest could read it…” chimed in Yukaria.

“God. I should’ve realized sooner. This makes so much sense.”

Since it was related to a quest, it frustrated him. Moreover, Jun was annoyed that he hadn’t been able to get that quest. Putting that aside…

“We only have nine more days… sorry, Kasumi. We wasted some time.”

That was true. In nine days, the quest time limit would elapse. If it wasn’t completed by then, Kasumi would incur the quest penalty and die. Her battery would fall to zero percent. She would die for the third time.

“Well.. uh. After dying for the third time, do you know what happens? Could it be that maybe the player would be sent back to the real world?” Eri wondered.

Jun nodded his head, “Perhaps that may be the case. Stay optimistic! Kasumi-san, we’ll definitely help you through it.”

“Of course we will!”

As a matter of fact, Jun knew something that the others didn't.

Soon after he came to this world, he went around visiting various people. On the very day of the Birthday, some people decided to commit suicide immediately, and those people who died three times in just the morning were no longer around, for some reason or another.

That's what happened. All of them. Though he didn't keep records, tens, maybe even hundreds, of people took their own lives that day.

Jun knew. They did not go home to the world from which they came.

Because Junichiro Mikimori only came to this world after they had killed themselves, the afternoon of that day. Up until then, in the real world, if there had been any news on the disappeared players, it would have made headlines.

Eri's optimistic explanation had no chance of being true. So…

Jun looked carefully at Kasumi's face. Though she more or less looked pale, she remained calm.

She had nine days left. Though that didn't mean that she wasn't scared. Earlier, while she was going down the stairs, she hesitated a lot. That was the proof. If she fell from the stairs, she would have taken fall damage. As of now, to her, losing health was akin to dying. The way she expressed her fright was strange.

"Anyways, what's written inside?"

Hearing Eri, Kasumi read the book aloud.

Jun hastily took out his tablet to take notes.

Five thousand years ago, the Penglai Emperor was a great man. He created a giant empire and sent out his soldiers in search of immortality. Many soldiers made it to other islands, but died of exhaustion. However, a few returned with a clue as to perpetual youth and longevity.

One of them brought a certain mountain man back to the emperor with him.

The mountain man said that his people were just ordinary humans who had decided to isolate themselves in search of the truth of the world. They were unaffected by the tides of time, impervious to disease, and lived off the mist for sustenance.

"However, that is not to say that we, the mountain men, never die. If the emperor's wishes are for eternal life, your majesty should go capture an immortal bird. With the blood of an adult immortal bird, your majesty can be resurrected numerous times."

The emperor did all he could to capture an immortal bird. However, it was just a little chick. They found that it would need five thousand more years to mature.

"Until that day comes, I shall enter a deep slumber. In five millennia, I shall awaken, and when that happens, the Penglai Empire shall be restored."

And with that, the Penglai Emperor went to sleep.

Before long, the Penglai Empire crumbled and became forgotten in all but myths.

"That story sounds like it came out of a book by Osamu Tezuka [1]!"

“The legend of the fire bird is quite famous.”

“Though, normally, people who desire immortality like this get punished for the very thought…” Eri, well-cultured in manga, tilted her head. “We couldn’t read this story earlier, right? For the time being, that ‘immortal bird’ should be the Phoenix of Kunlun.”

Kunlun Mountain was home to many raid monsters. The Phoenix was a popular monster among them. With appropriate preparation, the Phoenix was said to be just a bit stronger than the Vermillion Bird, but it respawned much more quickly.

Generally speaking, raid monsters respawned every week. Though the Vermillion Bird could be fought once per day, in order to be able to fight them, adventurers had to band together and complete a long series of quests.

The Phoenix respawned every six hours, four times faster than that of the already special Vermillion Bird, living up to its reputation as the immortal bird. In spite of that, for a monster on the seventh island ring that could be farmed easily, it was not very popular.

“Maybe it’s for the quest. Or maybe it’s a quest that just needs an item to be picked up,” said Jun. “But then, if we just obtain its blood, the quest should complete…”

“Worst case scenario, we have to bring it back down into that room under the pyramid. But Ryuka’s bind point is still right in front of the pyramid. If we just get the item, we can teleport to the pyramid right after, and go into the pitfall… shouldn’t be *too* hard. The problem is, what item does this ‘The Resurrection of the Penglai Emperor’ quest need?”

“There’s the Phoenix’s drop, Phoenix Blood,” Ryuka said. That shop manager knew the drops of monsters on this island the best out of the five of them. “Each kill should get us one.”

“Maybe it’s a crafting material for an elixir?”

Elixirs were a type of consumable potions that healed a considerable amount of health. However, since the materials were expensive and difficult to get, raid guilds seldom made use of them.

“So Jun, you know it?”

“I trained my alchemy skill as quickly as possible. I remember a few recipes here and there,” he responded confidently, then turning to Ryuka.

“The Phoenix Blood is a material used for the creation of Elixirs. However, Elixirs have many recipes. Phoenix Blood can’t be effectively substituted out for any other materials. Well, if you’re making it normally, it’s easier to make it using different materials.”

“Just as expected from Ryuka… on the other hand, Jun, you’re a waste of time,” Yukaria stared viciously at him.

Jun glared back and said, “You’re really annoying.” Though…

“Well then. It shouldn’t be too hard, especially given the fact that it is an unpopular common drop, and the Phoenix respawns quickly,” Eri said, cheerfully, leaning on the back of her chair.

Similarly, Kasumi, who had stiffened from the mental strain, loosened up her body too, and let out a large sigh of relief.

Jun also sighed… and noticed that Ryuka looked pale.

“Hey, Ryuka. Do you have any in storage?”

“Uh… no. I sold all that I had.” Ryuka looked at Jun, as if she had something else to say.”Jun, remember a little while before, when you helped us out?”

“Hmm… with that violent adventurer?”

Come to think of it, that guy, a member of the Illusionary Brigade, for some reason wanted to buy everything from Ryuka. His name was Zakka.

“That guy wanted a Phoenix Blood.”

Jun frowned. That was weird. Something seemed off to him.

Realizing their situation, Eri and Kasumi’s smiling faces stiffened again.

“Last night, I got Genta-sensei’s trade records from the time when we were gone, but it seems somebody else bought out our entire inventory. By some odd coincidence, it was another member of the Illusionary Brigade.”

“Yukaria.”

“Hold on, gimmie a sec.” With the help of a communication stone, Yukaria quickly asked one of her acquaintances to stand watch for raid notices at the bulletin board in the town center. “Yeah… yeah, is that so…”

During the call, her face turned stern.

“Huh, I’ll check again. This whole week, the Illusionary Brigade has been setting up camp.”

There’s definitely something fishy going on here…

Jun groaned quietly.

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TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

[1] – Arguably the most famous Japanese mangaka. Creator of works including Astro Boy and Black Jack.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 3: Raid Guild
Part 3

Camping.

In MMORPGs, the term, “camping” referred to staying in the same place and killing a monster over and over again each time it respawned. When performed against raid monsters, camping could last up to two weeks, or sometimes even longer.

Of course, having an entire guild stay in the same place for a long time could incite tensions with other groups of people. In games where PKing was allowed, this could provoke entire wars.

In Sky World, PKing was unregulated outside of towns.

“At any rate, it’s strange,” moaned Jun, as he munched on the bread he baked himself.

After they managed to confirm that the Illusionary Brigade was camping the Phoenix, the group reconvened for lunch in the bar and shared whatever information they had learned.

It had become clear that the Illusionary Brigade was out in a frenzy collecting Phoenix Blood.

“It’s not just my shop. They’ve scoured the whole city, just to look for Phoenix Blood.” Ryuka had gotten in touch with other shopkeepers. “I heard that they, whoever they were, were buying them out at any cost. Even if they were overpriced tenfold, they’d swoop in and make the purchase without hesitating. In the auctions too. As soon as the Phoenix Bloods were placed on display, they would pay the buyout price. Now, nobody in the whole city has any Phoenix Blood. And even with all that the Illusionary Brigade has bought, they’re still camping Phoenixes…”

“It’s indisputable among everybody I know. They’re definitely camping Phoenixes,” Yukaria chimed in. “Though a few guilds have gone into negotiations with the Illusionary Brigade, they respond with, ‘We’re not in the mood to stop at this moment,’ persistently… They won’t even tell us why they’re engaging in such activities. Those guys are just stubborn, even when threatened with weapons.”

“Brute force will always reign supreme,” interjected Eri.

From the start, the Illusionary Brigade was known as a menacing force. They were famous for their coerciveness in negotiations with their incredibly large 500-person-strong guild. Though now, it seemed that they had shifted their focus to the fourth island ring…

“Hey, on just this island, it seems like there’s about a hundred Illusionary Brigade members,” continued Eri. She had amassed some information of their members from other adventurers. “Over the course of about two months, there were many newcomers to this lower island. Though my contacts heard a lot about them… there’s not much that they know in detail. The Illusionary Brigade has many strict rules and regulations. As soon as you join, you have to sever ties with any player not affiliated with the guild. You aren’t even allowed non-guild-issued communication stones, let

alone ones for former friends. It's like an army."

"Well, that's 'cause raid guilds often resemble armies in nature. Disallowing communications is just a precaution against spies."

Jun had joined raid guilds before in other MMOs. He had even been at the center of such guilds, along with Kai as the leader. There was a time when they had been the best in the server. In the end, Kai lost interest and neglected his responsibilities…

He disbanded a group with just a single "well, I've had enough".

Though that seemed typical of Kai, he managed to earn the ire of many a player. Jun was always swept along with his whims.

Even Kai had a weakness. His feelings were always deep towards people he considered friends. Bringing Kasumi to Sky World was very like him. First doing so on a whim, later regretting it, and then recklessly pushing her away. However this was just the way his strong wishes to protect her manifested themselves.

Jun understood Kai/Sakuya's thoughts, but could not approve. The result of their differing views was a duel to the death. It happened more than a month ago.

If I can't get Kasumi through this… I'll never be able to face Kai again.

Noticing Jun glance over at her, Kasumi stiffened and smiled.

Damn it…

His heart throbbed. It must have been terrifying to have these feelings of despair and dread assail her.

She's my companion. I can't lose one of my greatly treasured companions.

The situation was as grave as could be.

But it was still too early to give up. They could still do tons of things.

"Eri. Can you go into more detail about what you heard about people who joined the Illusionary Brigade?"

"Nobody knew anything too important. First of all, they're focused on recruiting heavy warriors, white magicians, and black magicians. They're only taking half the magic swordsmen. Too bad for you, Jun."

"So they've got plenty of attackers. Makes sense for a large guild. In order to maintain balance, they can't just randomly select recruits. To keep things stable, essentially, they shouldn't be taking too many of the lower strata classes like attackers…" Jun retorted, responding calmly to Eri's provocation.

Eri spewed out, "Well that's boring."

Jun redirected the conversation.

"Well. There will always be new faces coming in and out. People fighting against raid monsters on the fifth and sixth rings need to prepare their equipment. They were really organized like an army, taking down strong monsters and aiming to became stronger themselves.

Loot from raid monsters often divvied up based on individual contribution. It is often the case that armor considered top quality by regular players is also considered trash by even lower ranking members of raid guilds.

Rather, that had to be the case. They, having entered a strictly organized army, had to be compensated for their

discomforts in some way. For the promise of increased power for their own characters, those who joined raid guilds are content with remaining mere pawns.

That in itself was not bad, but…

The nature of these raid guilds meant that they couldn't avoid a sense of elitism.

"The Illusionary Brigade seems notorious for being nasty. After joining, it was common for new recruits to take over and camp areas. I've heard that they purposefully unleash trains on others and monopolize monsters that respawn by triggers."

A "train" was a term developed early in the MMORPG world.

After engaging in battle with many monsters, one would send them all at a nearby group member.

For example, an adventurer infiltrating a goblin fortress could run past an unsuspecting lookout and bring with him goblins from inside the fortress. As the chain of goblins that would emerge from the fortress looked like a train, the word was coined for this concept.

When the train stopped right in front of another adventurer and the current train driver died, the role of the train driver would pass onto that nearby player. In MMOs, when somebody yells "Train!", everybody in the vicinity had to immediately drop whatever they were doing and flee.

However, with strong enough armor that could withstand such onslaughts, members of raid guilds could easily accidentally cause trains, though usually, they would feel ashamed afterwards.

But creating trains on purpose with the intention of killing other people…

Jun looked back to what had happened on Altaria. On that isolated island, Jun knew that that guild leader behaved unscrupulously and was no match for Jun herself. At wits end, she had no choice but to turn to MPK as her final option.

Eri's description of the Illusionary Brigade's actions was incorrect. It was clear that they couldn't have been unleashing trains on others just for their own happiness.

"They just absolutely want to do it."

"Raid guilds on the order of hundreds of members all wanted to go to higher rings. It seems nobody knows why the Illusionary Brigade would be so keen on having such a large presence in a place like this."

Though Lao Thai, an island on the seventh ring, was said to be home to three thousand adventurers, most of them were unaffiliated with any large entity or only operated in small groups of up to ten.

Though there were a few guilds with more than a hundred players, they served no other purpose than to facilitate cooperation between players, never to do raids. Because their members weren't even hardcore MMORPG players, their intentions didn't change much after the Birthday.

Rather, people who were apt to risk their lives by joining a raid guild were quite eccentric.

"I really wonder why those fellows in the Illusionary Brigade are collecting so much Phoenix Blood…"

"At least, we know that they have no interest in the pyramid."

"Ah, that reminds me. Jun, you went back to the pyramid right? How was it there?"

“Basically, all we found out was that the Illusionary Brigade doesn’t know anything.”

Ryuka’s bind point was still in front of the Penglai Emperor’s Pyramid. They made use of it. Jun brought a few of his dark hunter friends, as they were well versed in the art of investigation, and revisited the Pyramid thanks to Ryuka’s teleport spell.

Those dungeon experts left no stone in the pyramid unturned. Searching the hidden rooms, they even managed to begin and clear the appraisal quest.

What they did find out that time though, was that Kasumi and Ryuka were the first ones in the world to have experienced what they did.

“Dark hunters have the ability to analyze footprints. Yesterday, when they used that ability, they found that in the hidden passageway, there were no footprints other than the ones we left. Dust had constantly been piling up. That dust also could not have been due to magic.”

“I wonder how much we can trust that ability of theirs,” said Ryuka, doubtful.

Yukaria smiled, “Where a game system is concerned, footprint analyses cannot deceive.”

“Is that so? So analyses that come from the system are absolute. Sorry, I still don’t know much about games.”

“Actually, it’s good to question what we take for common sense,” Jun interjected. “We don’t know where a vulnerability could lie … Okay, let’s get back to the main conversation. There isn’t at all any other way to the room with the pitfall trap than the hidden passageway. While I’m at it, our footprints were the only footprints in that room for at least a hundred years.”

“Your point is,” said Kasumi, summarizing the results of their expedition. “The Illusionary Brigade’s efforts in gathering Phoenix Blood has nothing to do with anything related to the Penglai Emperor’s quest.” Everybody nodded. Everything up to now made sense. The problem lay with what was just said. “So, why? Even if it has nothing to do with the pyramid or with making elixirs, why would the Illusionary Brigade be camping Phoenixes for so long?”

Nobody had anything to say.

The raid guild was camping there with many, as much as a hundred, people for an extended period of time. They bought up all of the Phoenix Blood in town. What did they have in mind that led them to go to such lengths?

When would they stop camping? If they wouldn’t, would they be open to passing the camp location over temporarily?

“I don’t think there’s any way to get rid of the Illusionary Brigade,” Eri said, dejected. “It will be hard. Obsessing so much over Phoenix Blood and having it become the guild’s reason to live, that is, over getting stronger, must have been caused by an incredibly deep desire. If they needed a lot of materials for stronger weapons and armor, that’d be it. They’re thinking of controlling a monopoly over Phoenix Blood.”

“Getting other raid guilds to go to war with them… would that be impossible?”

After Jun thought about it for a bit, he shook his head. “We don’t know whether we could be able to do it, or if it would even turn out well. During a war, we wouldn’t even be able to get any Phoenix Blood. Not to mention that we don’t even have that kind of connections. First of all… nine days wouldn’t be enough. There isn’t even a large scale raid guild here on this island right now.”

“Ugh, so it’s no use.”

A Black magician’s teleport spell allowed fast travel between towns. However, only an airship could transport

adventurers between islands. Such obstacles to movement existed in Sky World.

“Let’s continue gathering information. Yukaria, I’m counting on you to find and prepare volunteers for the Phoenix raid. It doesn’t matter whether you tell them about our situation. We need to be ready to swoop in immediately for our raid on the off-chance that the Illusionary Brigade disappears tomorrow. Ryuka, you’re in charge of going around and visiting the merchants once again. Kasumi-san, can you go through the bars and make sure that nobody has any more Phoenix Blood? Eri, can you make a list of people who are bitter with the Illusionary Brigade?”

“Fine with me, but… do you have a plan?”

“Of course I do.”

“Okay, Jun. I do love your scheming, so don’t let your perseverance rot.”

“Stop praising me, I’m shy.” Jun grinned widely.

“Exactly what do you have in mind? Are we not going to try to negotiate with the Illusionary Brigade?”

“Before that, I want to have a few things ready. Even if we enter discussions, we need to have a few trump cards to play.”

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 3: Raid Guild
Part 4

Jun, having purposefully checked in at a usually empty inn, secluded himself in his room. After making sure that the door was safely locked, he called for Alice.

“So far, here’s what I know.” Alice nodded in response. “Let’s try to make this fast. If you have any clues, please let me know.”

“Any… clues?”

“It doesn’t matter what. Just anything about this quest, the Penglai Emperor, or why the Illusionary Brigade needs Phoenix Blood. Why would the developers design such a deadly quest? Exactly what kind of event is this?”

Alice shook her head in silence. It meant that she couldn’t respond. Though he didn’t expect much, Jun took a huge sigh.

“I’m begging you. *Anything* would be great. Did this quest exist since the start?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m asking if this quest was the same back when Sky World was an MMO.”

“It was.”

“Well, so it’s settled that the dangerous penalty of that quest stayed. But now, adventurers have to put up with a limited battery. Was that danger part of the quest design? Is there any way out?”

“There isn’t.”

“Let me rephrase my question. Is the situation with the Illusionary Brigade collecting Phoenix Blood something that would have been done back then too?” Alice remained silent. However, that was enough for Jun. “I understand. So, they won’t abandon their position.”

“I didn’t say anything.” It was true that she didn’t say anything. Though, there had to have been specific restrictions that Alice followed. However, she tried to keep those guidelines secret as much as she could. “So can I leave?” Jun took out a special linkstone from his back. “That is…”

“Right. You know what happened on Altaria Island. It’s Sakuya’s.”

“Are you going to… contact her?”

“Well, the situation calls for it.”

When Alice disappeared, Jun shook the linkstone.

Kai/Sakuya. He still didn't quite know what to make of her.

Jun's close friend. Kasumi's close friend. The complex circumstances that these words could not express, and the sentiments behind them, enveloped both of them. However…

"Yo! Haven't heard from you in a while." Just as her slightly suspicious voice seeped out of the linkstone, Jun's spirits rose. He had missed her voice. Though he had only first heard her voice a month ago, he felt like he had known that voice all along. "I'd hoped that you would have contacted me sooner. How awful of you, ignoring me for a whole month. If I were fickle, I would have broken the linkstone a long time ago. You should really study the female psychology some more."

Just two months prior, he had assumed that her voice would be that of a boy. Though he knew that they were both the same age, and that Kai was quite clever, Jun thought that she would've looked older than him.

He reminisced about these things as he listened to her tomboy-ish voice, thinking about her from the bottom of his heart.

It was Kai. This intonation and slurred speech. Her aloof and teasing attitude.

"Is now a good time?"

"I'm free today. Shouldn't we, as friends, chat until we're satisfied?"

"There's something I want to know… The Illusionary Brigade is collecting Phoenix Blood. Do you happen to know anything about what it can be used for?"

"You don't really care for large-scale guilds, huh. Well, I think it just all comes back to money."

"It might. That's probably in the right direction. I just want your opinion. I'm asking if the guild's main forces are on higher island rings. As a matter of fact, over here, there's no information about anything past the fourth ring. How is it?"

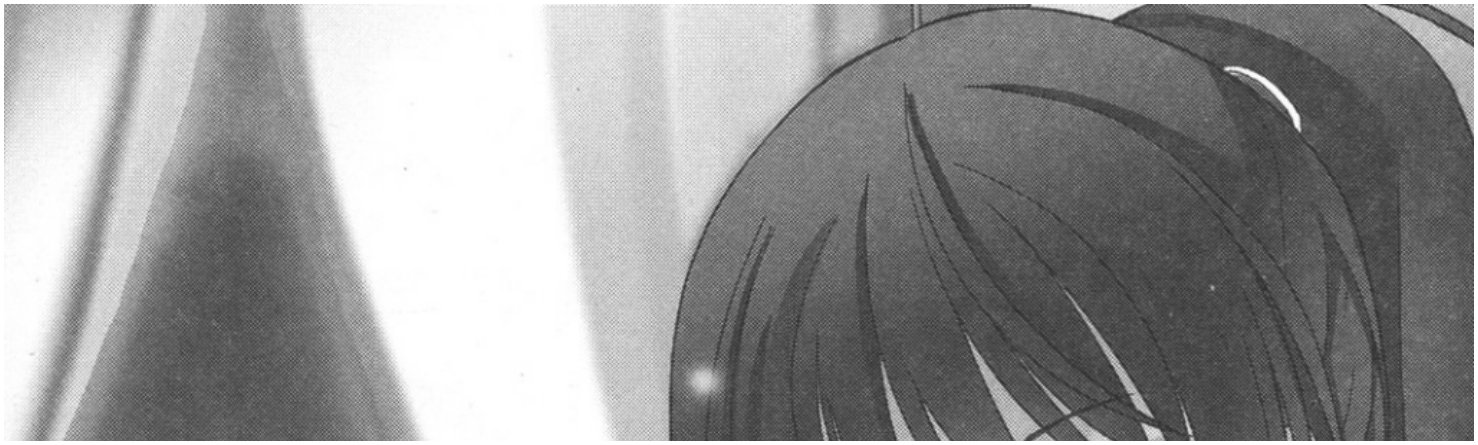
"What do you mean, 'how'?"

"Hasn't the Illusionary Brigade been painfully defeated?" In Jun's mind, Sakuya was facing her linkstone with a smile on her face.

"Jun, I don't know much about what goes on inside large-scale guilds."

"Anyways, Sakuya, haven't you worked with the Illusionary Brigade before?"

"Unfortunately, they didn't think very highly of us. But there wasn't much of tension between us."



As far as Sakuya was concerned, though they were trivial, there had been provocations between them. Jun knew of Kai’s uncanny ability to get on others’ nerves and pierce them with her words.

“Well, see. We haven’t been able to put out the sparks that did occur.”

That was all Jun needed to hear. Sakuya and her friends had a hostile relationship with the Illusionary Brigade. One of the reasons why they had been driven to a corner could have been her group.

“We need Phoenix Blood for a quest. That item is dropped by the Phoenix on Lao Thai. Do you know it?”

“Ah, I know. I’ve even taken part in a Phoenix raid once. Sorry, but I didn’t really enjoy it, so I didn’t ever get any of its blood.”

“As for now, the Illusionary Brigade is camping it. It’s already been more than a week. Whether they still can’t hand it over after negotiations, we have to find out…”

“Jun, I bet that with your unrivaled charismatic love of harmony, you would be able to move them to tears and convince them to let you guys use it.”

“Just to make sure in case they won’t budge, I want that information. Specifically, if we had to go to war, and call in reinforcements.”

“Would that be okay? Do you know how many members they have camping the Phoenix?”

“According to information we’ve gotten here, about hundred new faces have come to the island.”

“Do those newcomers of two months all seem to be there?” Unfazed, Jun smiled bitterly. He didn’t know what went on within the guild itself. “Jun, really, nobody knows about what I’m about to say. The Illusionary Brigade only knows about the same as us.” Prefacing with this, she continued, “Phoenix Blood is a material for a high ranked alchemy recipe. This recipe, found on the fourth ring… is a recipe for a special kind of potion. But it is kind of weak. It can charge tablet battery by just a little bit.”

“I knew there had to be something… so that’s why…”

The hundred or so people camping the Phoenix were underlings in the guild. Buying up items without caring about the expense and trying to endlessly collect them. It had to be some sort of consumable.

The guild wanted to get its hands on them.

The final thing that solidified Jun’s hypothesis was what Alice had said. She remained silent when Jun asked if it could have also been done back when Sky World was still an MMO.

The Birthday greatly changed one mechanic.

Battery Level.

It used to be the case that no matter how many times somebody died, there would just be a small penalty incurred. Shortly after the Birthday, the term “the third death” was coined.

Quarreling with other guilds, and raids. There were many dangers in Sky World. Challenging guilds in previously unknown areas came with increased dangers of death. As far as adventurers were concerned, the current death penalty was too unforgiving.

If there existed an item that could mitigate the effects of death, it would be worth collecting.

“Thank you. I’ve figured out what to do.”

“No problem. Now then, isn’t it time for you to hurry up and pay me back?”

“Sorry, but I’m poor.”

“The price for information is other information of course… Jun.” She chuckled. “How’s Kasumi doing? Is she safe?”

“Ah. I’m doing whatever it takes to bring her to you, kick you over, and have you kneeling on the ground in front of her. We’ve decided. Look forward to it.”

“Is that so? I’m relieved… By no means have you laid a hand on her yet, right?”

“Of course I haven’t!”

“Even though you yelled at me, I’m not upset. Calm down, even if Kasumi may be a bit heavy, she’s a good girl. And if it’s convenient for you, I’m willing to join your harem myself.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about! Are you sure that you don’t have a tumor growing in your brain?!”

“Excuse me. That was just a confession from the bottom of my heart. Ah, calm down. I’m bi, so I can take both of you on. Maybe we can have fun, the three of us, someday…”

“I have stuff to do. I’m hanging up.”

“Well then, see ya!”

Returning Sakuya’s linkstone into his pouch as soon as he could hear her no longer, Jun released a sigh.

Did she catch on?

He hid Kasumi’s current situation from her. He hid his own mistake in the Pyramid. Even if Sakuya *did* push her down onto Altaria Island, she did it to protect her. Sakuya’s tendency to worry profusely about those close to her, unrivaled by nothing but her infinite perverseness, caused Jun to not want to tell her.

Either way, going from island to island took time. Because of the air currents, traveling up and down island rings took whole days by scheduled airship. Between the fourth and fifth rings, there was an even more extreme turbulence, a grand storm. Going from the fourth ring to Lao Thai on the seventh would take more than five days.

Certainly, if Sakuya’s group had their own private airship, it would be a different story, but…

He didn’t want any advice. They could do it on their own. If Jun wasn’t certain about whether they could, then why would he have declared that they would be able to chase Sakuya?

Jun left the inn and returned to gathering information again.

If he was really on to something…

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 3: Raid Guild
Part 5

The Phoenix, which resided in a temple halfway up Mount Kunlun, was one of the strongest raid monsters on Lao Thai. It was said that the natural barrier existed solely to encage the Phoenix within the temple.

Even now, nobody knew how or why it had been captured and sealed there. The Penglai Emperor's Prophecy that Jun's party had uncovered served to provide an inkling of the now-lost history.

The temple stood two days by Long Walk away from Payang. However, after completing a special quest, adventurers could teleport to the Stonehenge at the foot of the mountain. It was a handy game mechanism.

Of course, Jun had already finished that quest long ago.

The following morning, he teleported there alone. With Long Walk, it took him two hours to reach the temple from the base of the mountain. Since he had drunk an invisibility potion, he did not have to fight any monsters on the way…

After he reached a hill from which he could see the temple, his eyes fell on a fortress blocking the way ahead, and beyond that, he spotted the Illusionary Brigade's camp.

Since small patrols of two littered the perimeter of the tall wooden fence, Jun couldn't find a single place from which they could break in. Observing them as closely as he could, Jun noticed that their magicians kept on casting See Invisibility spell.

They had been trained well. Jun even admired them a little. This guild really knew the ins and outs of PvPing.

"So, this means that we can't resort to normal means against them."

Lower ranked members were led to believe that their commanding officers were perfect humans. Someone who could lead an organization over the internet was deemed just as important as someone who could in the real world.

"Well, okay. For the time being, let's not expect too much from formal negotiations."

Though he didn't really wanted to do it, he had no choice. As he donned his school uniform again to show his messenger status, Jun set off in the direction of the entrance to the heavily guarded encampment.

The ensuing dialogue was just as he feared. Disheartened, he tried harder and harder.

From the start, the Illusionary Brigade underlings shunned him, and no matter what Jun said, they kept on refusing him. They even ignored his request to see their superior. Finally, stubborn as he was, Jun picked up his sword.

"Hey, hold on a sec. I've seen you around before." Just as a guard said that, Jun realized. It was Zakka, the guy who had tried to forcibly take all of the Phoenix Blood from Ryuka's shop. "That's right, I remember. If I'm not mistaken, you were that guy from the second-hand shop…"

“Ah, you again?” After that curt response, Jun sighed exaggeratedly. “You were being reckless to that little girl… You’d best only act like that with 2D girls.”

Zakka made eye contact with one of his comrades. Others nearby took a few steps back. “Wait, that’s a misunderstanding! … What are you blathering about?!”

“Don’t you get it? … though I don’t think you’re capable of holding back your lust.”

Zakka became flustered, shaking his head profusely.

The members who were surrounding them jeered. Fed up with being organized like an army, they had to have been thirsty for some sort of entertainment and ridiculing Zakka came in handy.

“Quit screwing around with me! I hope you realize that we’re not in the middle of town!”
His cheeks flushed from the undesired attention, Zakka took out his large axe.

Bandit Warrior.

That was Zakka’s class. Though it was a front-line attacker, just like Jun’s magic swordsman, a bandit warrior could not use magic. Instead, bandit warriors had excellent resistance to magic and were known as the magic swordsman’s mortal enemy in PvP.

“Hey, hey, aren’t you cool with that big weapon of yours. Want to have a one on one duel to test your manliness?” teased Jun.

“Huh, do you think that you could possibly win against me?”

Jun glanced around. When he mentioned dueling Zakka, it seemed to fire up the others. Not a single one of them appeared to want to help Zakka out. Labeling Zakka a lolicon worked out quite well for him.

This was all in accordance with his plan. He shrugged, knowing that he had no choice but to do it this way.

“Awaken!” As light enveloped his body, his clothes changed to armor. Jun drew his greatsword from behind him.
“Well then, brave lolicon-sama, show me your power!”

“I’ll cut you in two!”

Kicking the ground, Zakka charged at him. He moved in a straight line.

——— *Of course, heh.*

Jun chuckled as he took a nimble step and avoided Zakka’s attack.

“This guy won’t stop moving!”

Bandit warriors had the strongest regular attacks. Aside from attack abilities that could be used once every few minutes, they could not be affected by magic. If magic swordsmen imbued magic into their swords, their attacks would be rendered almost completely ineffective. So as a matter of course, spells like Quick Stun did not work.

If only he could move as freely as Jun could, Zakka would have been a formidable foe.

Zakka abruptly unleashed an attack ability. Though Power Attack and Whirlwind could do large scale damage…

In any case, his unvaried attacks were nothing to be afraid of.

“Uh-oh, this is dangerous.”

Jun sidestepped two of his attacks by a very thin margin.

Zakka's face grew more and more stern. Bandit warriors could only attack. If he couldn't even land a single attack, then…

"You… what kind of cheats are you using?!"

"You should stop thinking that anything that doesn't make sense to you is automatically cheating." Zakka had no clue how Jun was dodging his attacks.

Jun looked around. The others were teasing Zakka and looking down on Jun. Those were the underlings of the guild. They too, just like Zakka, did not quite understand how Jun was able to keep it up.

It makes sense to me now. These guys have not been taught anything aside from raid mechanics.

He had all the information he needed.

"My turn to attack."

Jun swung his sword down at his unskilled opponent.

The duel turned completely one-sided.

Jun's HP bar was still full to the millimeter. Only Zakka's was depleting. As his health reached 20%, and then 10%, he dropped his sword.

"Pl-please wait. I surrender. I surrender!"

Jun drew his sword back. He stared at Zakka silently. Then, Zakka started laughing abjectly and stepped back.

Jun had not yet noticed that the Illusionary Brigade members who had come to watch their battle had now filled the entrance. They called out to Zakka franticly.

"Y-you guys, look at this dude! He's a cheating rascal! Let's get rid of him quickly…"

"Don't do anything," said a throaty male voice from behind them.

The crowd parted, and a tall, imposing male appeared. He was a young man with a full beard and well-shaped features. Clad in black armor, he carried a scythe.

He was a bandit warrior. And in addition to that, he was an elite of the guild, possessing armor leagues better than what Zakka had.

"O-officer! This guy…" Panicking, Zakka pointed at Jun.

However, the man completely disregarded Zakka's presence and made eye contact with Jun.

This guy's the boss of this unit.

Jun chanted, "Break Down", and changed back into his school uniform. Generally, when a player wanted to have a conversation, they would change into regular clothes to declare their intent. It meant that he didn't want to fight. At least, for now.

"Pardon me for causing a squabble at the gate. I'm unaffiliated with any guild. I came here to request a favor of you."

The officer was silent. Squinting, Jun saw his name light up green above his character.

Daikoku. That was the name of the leader of the one hundred newcomers to the island.

Jun explained the circumstances of his visit. That he got a quest from the Pyramid. That his friend was nearing her third death in just eight days. And finally, that he needed Phoenix Blood to prevent it from happening.

Looking back at the quest description, I expect that the curse will be unleashed after failing it just once. It's no big deal for Ryuka to die once. So…

"I'm begging you. Just one is all I need. Please let me have one. Or maybe you could let us do the Phoenix raid just once. In that case, I won't mind if you take every item other than the Phoenix Blood."

After sincerely and passionately saying that, Jun bowed his head. However…

"Go home. This is the Illusionary Brigade's camp." Having said that with indifference in his voice, Daikoku turned back.

"Please wait a moment. Is there any way…"

"You talk too much." Daikoku suddenly raised his hand. His underlings, now standing in rows, drew their swords.

"I get it. Well then, at least take this." Jun took out a new set of linkstones from his bag, and threw one linkstone to Daikoku. Almost as if he had eyes on his back, Daikoku caught it with his back turned. "Please hold onto it."

"I will look forward to hearing from you."

"Actually, it will be the other way around." Jun grinned. "Maybe you'll need to contact me."

"… What?"

"Now that that's done, I'll be taking my leave."

Jun turned around and ran off without saying anything else.

He had accomplished what he had set out to do. He had sown the seeds that were to be sown. Jun had not hoped that it would have gone as smoothly as it did. All he had to do to get the boss' attention was to act a bit.

Then, if those guys are able to handle things well…

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 3: Raid Guild
Part 6

Flashback to the night before that visit.

Jun gathered about ten of the most important members of the Vermillion Bird raid in the bar.

Discussions with them bore fruit. After a debrief on Kasumi's situation and how the Illusionary Brigade was camping out at the Phoenix, they agreed to help.

"If we *do* end up going to battle with the Illusionary Brigade or embarking on a Phoenix raid, it seems we'll be able to gather about 80 people," reported Eri, turning to look at Isao, who had been sitting next to her. A simple alchemist himself, he managed all of the craftsmen in Payang.

"That's not including any potential support," Isao said.

"Right, I didn't include the people who would work behind the scenes in the count. Hey, Jun, you're being awfully insistent on keeping the backstage workers separate from the rest of the group."

"Because we need to work separately at the same time. Eighty people should be enough for our actual work," Jun responded.

"The Illusionary Brigade has a hundred. And those hundred members are clad in raid gear. With just 80 untrained players, we would have literally *zero* chance of victory," chimed in Yukaria.

With her countless connections, she had been responsible for getting so many people to agree to help out. She knew all too well that they would be no match for a well-trained group of raid guild members.

"Of course, some of them *will* be skilled, but… if push comes to shove, and we have to fight, it'd be much better if we had two groups," Yukaria continued. Unfortunately, her former teammates were away on their honeymoon. They were touring around Sky World in an airship, and they wouldn't return for another month.

"One group is plenty enough. What I'm saying is that we can't afford to cross swords without a plan."

"Jun-san, what are you going to do?" Kasumi asked. "You said that you were going to negotiate with the Illusionary Brigade tomorrow, but…"

"The 'negotiations' are just an alibi for what I really have in store… though I'm sure they won't be receptive to what I have to say. Nonetheless, if we don't start preparing to fight now, we won't have an excuse for not being able to go through with the Phoenix raid later."

"That's right. It would really be laughable if we could make it all the way to the fight with the Phoenix, but not be able to finish it," said Isao, composed. Jun had not yet told him anything, but he seemed to have vaguely realized that Jun had something in store. Isao knew him well from working with him in other games.

“So, what *are* you going to do?” Eri asked, not satisfied with that explanation. “Are you saying that we are gathering people for a battle we know we’ll lose? Hurry up and tell us your plan.”

“I’ll start with how it’ll end. We’re going to use starvation as a war tactic.” Jun looked over at everybody. Having understood, Isao nodded, while the others blinked in surprise.

“Starvation as a war tactic?” Ryuka tilted her head. “So we won’t let them get any food. However, the Illusionary Brigade should definitely have magicians who can summon bread and water, right?”

“Yeah, most adventurers can summon as much food as they want. Therefore, starvation may not have been the best word to use. Let me rephrase it. We’ll cut off their provisions.”

“Jun, being the wise man exuding intelligence you are, you would understand. But you know, I’m just an inexperienced little elementary schooler so please explain it in simpler terms. What’s a provision?”

An inexperienced little elementary schooler would not talk like that!

Jun read into her retort.

“Supplies. Provisions refer to medical supplies, weapons, ammunition, and other items that fighters use. We’ll be restricting their access to those supplies.”

“But in Sky World, there’s no durability system,” Yukaria pointed out. In games, weapons and armor were assigned durability values, and as one fought, durability would decrease. Sky World had no inconvenient system like that.

“However, weapons and armor can still be damaged. Furthermore, all kinds of potions are needed for raids. Jun made eye contact with Isao. “Isao-san, please tell me what consumable items are needed for the Phoenix raid. Just what well-equipped raid guilds regularly use would be perfect.”

“Sure! Hi-potions aside… without anti-corrosion agents, weapons and armor would degrade a lot. And then, since Phoenixes can inflict the burn status effect, high grade burn salve is needed as well. Raid guilds should have resistance buffs against common negative status effects.”

“Excuse me for a second. Burn and disabled weapon effects don’t count as bad status effects?” asked Kasumi, with her hand raised, nervously, “… though I remember that we used anti-corrosion agents during the Vermillion Bird raid.”

“Eri, as a white magician, could you explain it to her?”

“Got it! Let me see, negative status effects… are status abnormalities that stick to your character. Stuff like paralysis, bind, sleep… you know, Yukaria’s specialty. These effects can usually be cured by a healer’s recovery magic, which can get rid of many, save a few, bad status effects at once. However, disabled weapons and armor are a separate thing completely. They’re not things that can be recovered with magic. That, Kasumi, is the work of alchemists and blacksmiths. Do you get it now?”

“So you’re saying that armor and weapon disability is recovered with alchemy and blacksmithing, right?”

“It requires special equipment. Or a potion. More specifically, anti-corrosion agents can prevent weapon and armor deterioration. Once broken, weapons and armor have to be taken to a special workspace to be repaired with blacksmithing. As is it is now, that process has fallen out of style. It’s annoying… well, aside from raid monsters with special abilities, enemies usually can’t cause weapons to deteriorate. It might be a different story on higher island rings, but at least that’s the way it is here, on the seventh ring. NPCs don’t sell the potion, so players have to make them themselves.”

Kasumi nodded, finally understanding. Picking up things quickly was her forte.

“Well then, is the burn effect any different?”

“That’s a special status effect. Though it wipes out all other status effects, it cannot be cured with the use of magic. You *could* wait for it to elapse on its own, but it would take a few days. Luckily, the burn effect can be healed with a high grade burn salve, a special item that alchemists can craft. Since that effect is really rare on the seventh island ring, NPCs here don’t sell it.”

“So basically, Jun’s plan is to prevent the Illusionary Brigade from getting any more of these key consumable items, right?”

“Right. We’re aiming at the anti-corrosion agents and high grade burn salves, so by extension, we’re pinning for the alchemist and blacksmith areas in the crafting district of town. In order to stop their supply, we need to buy up all of them in the city, and then reserve all of the crafting spaces so that the Illusionary Brigade cannot use them. Though in the beginning, they’ll still have a stockpile, the Phoenix respawns every six hours, so they can fight it up to four times a day. In that case, since they have 100 members, their stockpiles will surely be depleted soon. And then after that, all we have to do is sit tight and watch.”

Jun laughed loudly.

Eri responded, “Wow, what an unpleasant laugh!” as if it were something evil. Some of the others moved away in surprise, while Yukaria and Isao smiled and muttered, “How Jun-like!”

They adjourned.

There would be a war.

This conflict between this temporary alliance of volunteers against the Illusionary Brigade may as well have been Sky World’s first full-scale war.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 3: Raid Guild
Part 7

According to earlier reports, it seemed that some Illusionary Brigade members would visit Payang to buy consumable items in bulk in order to replenish their stockpiles. Fortunately, it just so happened that the day right after Jun met with them was one of those item restocking days.

Before their forces could return to town, adventurers working under Isao scoured the city for all of the alchemists and merchants, and then the auction house, buying up all of the anti-corrosion agents and burn salves.

Seven days remained.

“Yo, I let adventurers skilled in smithing and alchemy know what’s going on.” Isao announced happily. In the morning, as usual, he had gone to the inn where Jun and co were staying.

When training alchemy or smithing, the biggest hindrance proved to be the requirement of a suitable working area. In the city, there was only one place where these skills could be used. Therefore, those who wanted to hone those skills became referred to as craftsmen.

As a result, so-called alchemists and blacksmiths formed their own networks. Even if they didn’t join any large crafting guilds, they could still feel solidarity with the rest of the crafter community in smaller guilds. Jun’s plan depended on them being able to make use of this solidarity among craftsmen.

If even a single alchemist or blacksmith did not cooperate, his plan’s prerequisite would not be satisfied…

“Those Illusionary Brigade dudes really have an awful rep ‘round here. Dead ass. Everybody gladly agreed to cooperate. They’re on lookout around all the blacksmithing and alchemy areas.”

“How’s buying up everything?”

“We’ve put in a word with some adventurers who possess some stock. We should have everything from within the boundaries of the city. But hey, is this fine, Jun? We’re spending a lot, man.”

“Doesn’t matter to me. Keep going. If necessary, I’ll repay the favor sometime… do we not have enough money?”

“Nah, seems the guild’s got a large stockpile. Got it bro, I’ll do what I can.”

Fortunately, Jun had valuable security items.

It was the airship that he had just recently lent out to those cooking aficionados. They borrowed money from Isao’s guild, the Sage Association, to serve as collateral.

Members of production guilds, besides selling their products, could use alchemy to craft mostly consumables. Luckily, the Sage Union had amassed a lot of liquid capital.

“Next, we’re off to the port, right?”

In the southern part of Payangwas the island’s sole airship port. It was an open place where, unsurprisingly, regularly scheduled airships could anchor in between their routes around the islands.

“Dead ass? All of the Illusionary Brigade’s main force is on the fourth ring or higher, right? Surely it would take at least seven days for regularly scheduled airships from there to reach here.”

Without using personal airships, there was no way to go from the fifth to fourth rings without having unlocked the weekly airship service by completing the Fuelfai Campaign. Even with personal airships, in order to access the route, a special item from the Fuelfai Campaign was still necessary. According to the first to make it through, there was a special whirlwind that could only be crossed if timed in a particular way. This was known as the Grand Storm.

The next hole in the Grand Storm would appear after three days. Following the route of a regularly scheduled airship, it would take an additional four days after that to land on Lao Thai.

“I’m pretty sure of it.”

“Often the people will stay on the fourth ring anyway. In a guild shrouded by secrecy, information rarely travels even within it, yo.”

“Ah, well, that would be unexpected.” Jun responded, avoiding the question. At any rate, his informant was Sakuya. Since then, she had passed along information several times, happily informing him of the Illusionary Brigade’s movements.

“Jun, if you could beat the Illusionary Brigade into a corner, I would be really happy,” she said, laughing happily from the bottom of her heart. “Well, it’s your battle. Or just my own wish.”

“It’s both of ours.”

It seemed like they were at the brink of an awful confrontation with the Illusionary Brigade.

“Yeah, yeah. They have one personal airship. Since it’s small, even packed in like sardines, it would only hold ten people, but … it’s really fast. They could make it over to you just a single day. That’s if they were careful enough to leave the day after a hole opened in the Grand Storm,” reported Sakuya the previous day.

“Isao-san. Please keep getting players to join our cause.”

“Got it!” Isao nodded intently.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 3: Raid Guild
Part 8

Acts of violence in town were inexcusable.

The Imperial Guard stationed in the city piloted Knight Golems and could teleport anywhere. As they were incredibly strong fighters, even members of a large scale guild would not stand a chance against them. Big and booming cities like Payang had over a hundred Knight Golems at their disposal. In addition, the skillful Guard would usually keep watch over the town through their magic, looking out for bad-intentioned adventures causing trouble.

Sure enough, though Illusionary Brigade's restocking team would soon pick up on Jun's little trick, they wouldn't be able to interfere with Jun's squad or any of the merchants around town. They could do nothing but grind their teeth.

"If you don't want anything bad to happen to you, listen to us," threatened members of the Illusionary Brigade inside hidden alleyways. However, just as they wanted to go through with the threats and assaulted a group of local alchemists, a Knight Golem appeared behind them.

Afterwards, when Jun heard of this situation, he thought that somebody clever had reported that the Illusionary Brigade was probably causing unrest in advance. Even the city itself knew of the Illusionary Brigade's outrageous mannerisms and watched their members well.

"I thought that the Guard didn't really think much of adventurers," Eri said, laughing happily, as she heard the report from the first floor of their usual inn.

On the one hand, Kasumi, who had been sitting next to her, said, "Really? But whenever I greet them, they respond with a smiling face," slanting her head.

It used to be that Jun would have surely chuckled and added, "That's just because your affinity with them is high." Since she repeatedly completed a lot of quests, Kasumi had maxed out her Affinity in Payang.

The current Jun had a different point of view.

Kasumi Yukasaki, even without using her Affinity or other numerical values, had a certain charm about her that attracted people to her in Sky World. That's what he thought now.

From the start, the denizens of the city and the Guard had never been boring, one-sided NPCs…

"Here's the takeaway. I still have a long way to go. Preoccupied only with adventurers, I forgot that the people of this world were not just NPCs."

Practically speaking, it's not unlikely that they would try to trip us up.

Though he didn't make any facial expression, Jun stroked his chest in relief. This was a gamble he couldn't afford losing. Double and triple checking was quite necessary.

“It’s not too late. We can ask players who get along well with the regular residents of the city to contact the influential NPCs. Though I don’t know how much they would understand our cause… if they could make sure that there was no animosity among the townsmen, everything would be fine.”

“If you say so, I can…”

“No, Kasumi-san, you asking them yourself won’t work. This might be bad, but we need to make you out as a tragic heroine.”

“A tragic… heroine, huh?”

“In fairy tales, an obvious heroine, and a clear-cut villain is necessary. Not to mention that our opponents are perverted otaku, right?” He quickly made eye contact with Eri, who understood immediately and puffed out her cheeks in discontent.

“Being a perverted otaku doesn’t have to be bad!”

“Speaking of that, Kasumi-san. You ought to know somebody who’s proud and prideful. Please introduce me. I want to entrust him with the job of telling our story to the soldiers. About the tragic heroine and the adventurers rising to save her.”

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 3: Raid Guild
Part 9

Lefay was a first-class member of the Guard.

As the second son of a merchant in Payang, he was expected to join the Guard while the eldest son would succeed his father.

First-class members of the Imperial Guard qualified to operate the near-invincible Knight Golems. Lefay was thirty-two years old and only eight years separated him from a public retirement and membership in the council. He was running down the path to success at full speed.

The council had claimed that the Imperial Guard, tasked with protecting Payang, was the city's trump card.

But protecting it from what? Dreadful attacks on the city by monsters, or even dangerous adventurers. Though only three thousand of them lived in the city, they held great economic power. Even dozens of regular citizens wouldn't be able to overpower one member of the Guard.

Adventurers – special beings who had been granted divine protection, able to return to life even after death. Though they looked just like humans, they were a completely different existence. In these few months since the adventurers came, some new trends emerged despite the city had been well established for a long time. They were particularly dynamic; some assimilated into the native culture, while on the other hand, others seemed to treat the natives as mere tools.

They were curious neighbors, who acted on whims and proved difficult to understand.

They couldn't match the strength of the proud and powerful Knight Golems, whose biggest concern was keeping the adventurers civilized.

All the while, Lefay was supposed to understand the adventurers. By no means were they heartless scoundrels. At least, some people he knew heard many things. About their marvelous world they called Reality where they had once lived. And about games they called MMOs and RPGs.

"Soooo, Kasumi-chan, a friend of mine, is really in a biiiiig pinch right now. You know, Kasumi-chan. The polite girl who always greets you guys," said Chacha, the adventurer in front of him. They were drinking tea in his usual station, in the room he himself called the intel room. "For the sake of helping Kasumi out, we adventurers have joined forces. We're rising up to give the evildoing Illusionary Brigade a taste of what they deserve. But even though I say that, they don't actually use force. They're more like saboteurs, just spreading their wrath and all."

Though she used some words Lefay didn't understand, it was a business as usual. In conversation, she displayed a strong grasp of many different areas of knowledge like a sage. In spite of their youth, those adventurer guys all knew a lot.

“Following from that, the members of the Illusionary Brigade do have a fondness for violence. What troubles me the most is that they’ll coerce people into doing things against their will under the threat of violence. Lefay-san, if your men watch over the Illusionary Brigade for us, we would be incredibly happy.”

“We treat all adventurers equally. We cannot take sides in any of your conflicts.” Lefay had no choice but to respond in that way. The superiors had said often that they should try to get information out of the adventurers. They were to act in such a way so they would better understand them. However, developing personal relationships, or acting out of kindness for them was disallowed. “If we see any signs of violence, we make sure to keep watch on them, as is our duty. If you take up arms against them, we will not act with discretion. You too will be punished.”

“Of course, that makes sense. For starters, I hate violence myself. Besides, I really like this city. I want to protect the city’s friendly atmosphere towards adventurers. Ah, here, Kasumi-chan baked a delicious pie. Try some if you want.”

“Sorry, I can’t take anything. We consider gifts from adventurers to be the same as bribes.”

“Um, it’s not meant to be a bribe or anything… How deplorable, and after Kasumi-chan went to such great lengths to bake it…”

“… Well, if it somehow shows up as lost property without a known owner, it is allowable to deal with it properly before it rots. Though I shouldn’t say this too loudly, there are many fans of Kasumi-dono’s [1] baking…” He coughed, and a second-class soldier came rushing towards him with a document. “Sorry to bother you, but can you sign this waiver to submit it as lost property?”

“Yeah, sure. Must be tough being a government official.” Just as she finished signing and left, second-class soldiers, enticed by the delicious smell of the pie, rushed into the room.

“Adventurers really make scrumptious food. Did you know that? There’s a new bakery in the second district owned by an adventurer too.”

“Hey, wasn’t it prohibited for adventurers to own land?”

“Well the legal owner is a regular merchant… the previous lady who owned it passed it on to the adventurer. She devoted herself completely to pastries.”

Watching on, as the second-class soldiers got busy devouring the pie like vultures, Lefay started thinking.

Adventurers.

What really are they, and why are they in this world?

What are they looking for?

Also, is there still any pie left for me?

“Officer, is it fine if I eat the last slice?”

“No, you glutton! Show some restraint!”

They hadn’t thought of using magic to check it for any poison. He knew that he could trust that female adventurer, Chacha, but still…

Lefay sighed, and snatched away the last slice.

He suspended it in his mouth. As he gently felt the texture of the pie, the sweet and sour fruit sap dripped down his tongue.

“Purely scrumptious.”

“Yeaaah, it’s the best!”

He thought that he would want to eat Kasumi’s pie again sometime in the future.

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TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

[1] – A formal honorific meant for use between people of similar rank. Somewhat antiquated, and roughly a more formal “-san”.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 3: Raid Guild
Part 10

Daikoku, the Illusionary Brigade's commanding officer, folded his arms as he watched his subordinates engage in battle with a Phoenix.

They had fought fifteen battles since that boy named Jun made contact with him.

They stayed at the respawn spot of the dreadful undying bird, which was also known as the physical incarnation of flame itself, without moving an inch. Since they had been accustomed to the battle and were well coordinated, they continued unilaterally dealing damage to the Phoenix.

"We have an issue with supplies," a male adventurer said seriously as he adjusted his glasses.

That man, Size, was Daikoku's aide. Like Daikoku, he had been a part of the Illusionary Brigade from the start.

"We're running low on high-grade burn salves and anti-corrosion agents."

Jun. That boy is trying to make our stockpiles of medicine we need for the Phoenix raid run dry by cutting off our supply.

"No matter what, we want to save as much as possible. We can reduce the amount of people fighting in order to lower our consumable expenditures…"

"No, let's not." Daikoku shook his head. "If we had our main army, we could defeat them with three parties. But those guys…"

"After all, they're just a motley crew of adventurers. They're completely different from our well-equipped, experienced, and well-trained army."

Daikoku was concerned that if they changed tactics this far in, the soldiers would only get confused, and he would lose his authority. Daikoku understood bureaucracy well. In real life, he was a regular white-collar worker, a low level manager. Playing MMORPGs was a longtime favorite hobby of his. At least to the extent that he bought a personal tablet just for the purpose of playing Sky World.

He could assert his own experience. Telling his current subordinates to adapt to the situation and act appropriately would bewilder their less capable selves.

"Hmm. I'll make that person join us. He'll pay for his mistakes."

"It's the higher-ups' policy. The elites think that since we already have plenty of intelligent leaders, disposable fighters are of a higher priority, with simple honesty valued more than wit. It's not your responsibility as a commanding officer."

“Criticism from the elites, huh.” Size pushed his glasses up and gazed downwards. Though he was quite capable, he was still just a college student. He didn’t understand the strength and dreadfulness of so-called “bureaucracy”.

“That was a slip of the tongue. Please forget what I just said.”

“Best case scenario, it’s still a complicated situation. Don’t say anything carelessly.” That boy’s loyalty ran deep. For this reason, Daikoku thought that he couldn’t only protect himself. “Don’t fret. We’re acting. I believe that people have just set out for the fourth ring. They should arrive tomorrow.”

“On an airship, right?”

“Yeah. I told them to send twelve powerful men, along with some medicine. It’s Sakamoto’s company.”

“Sakamoto-san is…” Size was surprised, and Daikoku smiled at him. Sakamoto was one of the veterans of the guild, just like Daikoku. Though he lacked any seriousness, a heavy warrior, he was the guild’s number one tank. But then, he *did* have the best equipment. Given that they sent his group, the higher-ups must have seriously been resolved to not let this Phoenix camp fall into anybody else’s hands.

“Furthermore, I see that it’s possible that that person, Jun, called on other guilds for gold and silver.”

The Silver Winged Knight Association, and the Golden Berry Club were powerful guilds that competed with the Illusionary Brigade for influence. He heard that their conflicts on the higher rings had intensified.

“I didn’t think that it seemed that they would have such support.”

“However, in actuality, those guys managed to gain control over all of the adventurers in Payang in a blink of an eye.”

“That’s because we’re hated.” Size glanced down at their underlings as if they were ants swarming around the Phoenix. “We’re not managing these energetic brats well enough. Whenever they go into town, I heard they often cause all sorts of ruckuses.”

“They blindly follow whatever anybody stronger than them says.”

“Isn’t that what the higher-ups said? … Well now, we’ll be scrutinized for it.”

“That’s for me to do.”

“Of course. … We’ll fight the Phoenixes steadily.”

This raid too would end safely. They had the same amount of consumables as usual. They reckoned that they should just barely be able to maintain their ground until the supply airship arrives.

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VOLUME 2

Chapter 3: Raid Guild
Part 11

Late at night, the full moon shining bright. About twenty adventurers hid in the meadow at the foot of Mount Kunlun.

“Hey, Jun. Are they really going to get off here?” Eri inquired, anxious. The Illusionary Brigade’s airship would arrive that night. Jun, well-informed by Sakuya, had chosen his twenty best fighters in preparation for an ambush.

However, this ambush would not take place in the harbor; it would occur in this meadow.

Of course, at the harbor, the Guard would not have let a battle break out…

“If they end up docking their airship somewhere else, all of our painstakingly hard work will have come to nothing.”

“Though docking at the harbor would normally be a no-brainer, there, they would have no choice but to put up with us. Aside from that, this location makes the most sense since it’s so close to Mount Kunlun, so they must be using it. Though that means that they could still do something unexpected…”

“What?”

“If by some chance, a problem arises, we can fight freely here. I reckon we can push through with brute force. They’re too confident in themselves.”

“Well, so what’s going to happen?” said Eri, still anxious.

Loud but distant roaring broke the night’s silence. Without mistake, this had to have been the airship’s engine whirring.

Showered in moonlight, the ten-meter-long ship shaped like a mayonnaise jar landed in the field. Men began descending from the ship. There appeared five, six… ten people. And two stayed on top of the ship.

In total, there were twelve people. Jun smiled. This was exactly as Sakuya had said.

“First, we’re seizing the ship. Let’s go!”

At the signal, his troops attacked all at once.

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